Achievement Unlocked

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by The Feels Whale (miscellea)

Summary

One day, after five years of reasonably peaceful marriage with only a few kidnappings and sex pollen incidents, Shen Yuan is sent back to his old body without warning. Luo Binghe makes a deal with an alien entity calling itself the System to perform a mission in exchange for the ability to bring his husband home.

The mission is simple; [Uncover secret transmigrator plotline and flesh out the character wiki!]

At least it will be once he figures out what the words ‘transmigrator’ and ‘wiki’ mean.

Or: That one where Shen Yuan and Luo Binghe don’t realize they’re in a domestic fluff bonus chapter.

Written for the 2021 MXTX Big Bang with art created by Ataratah

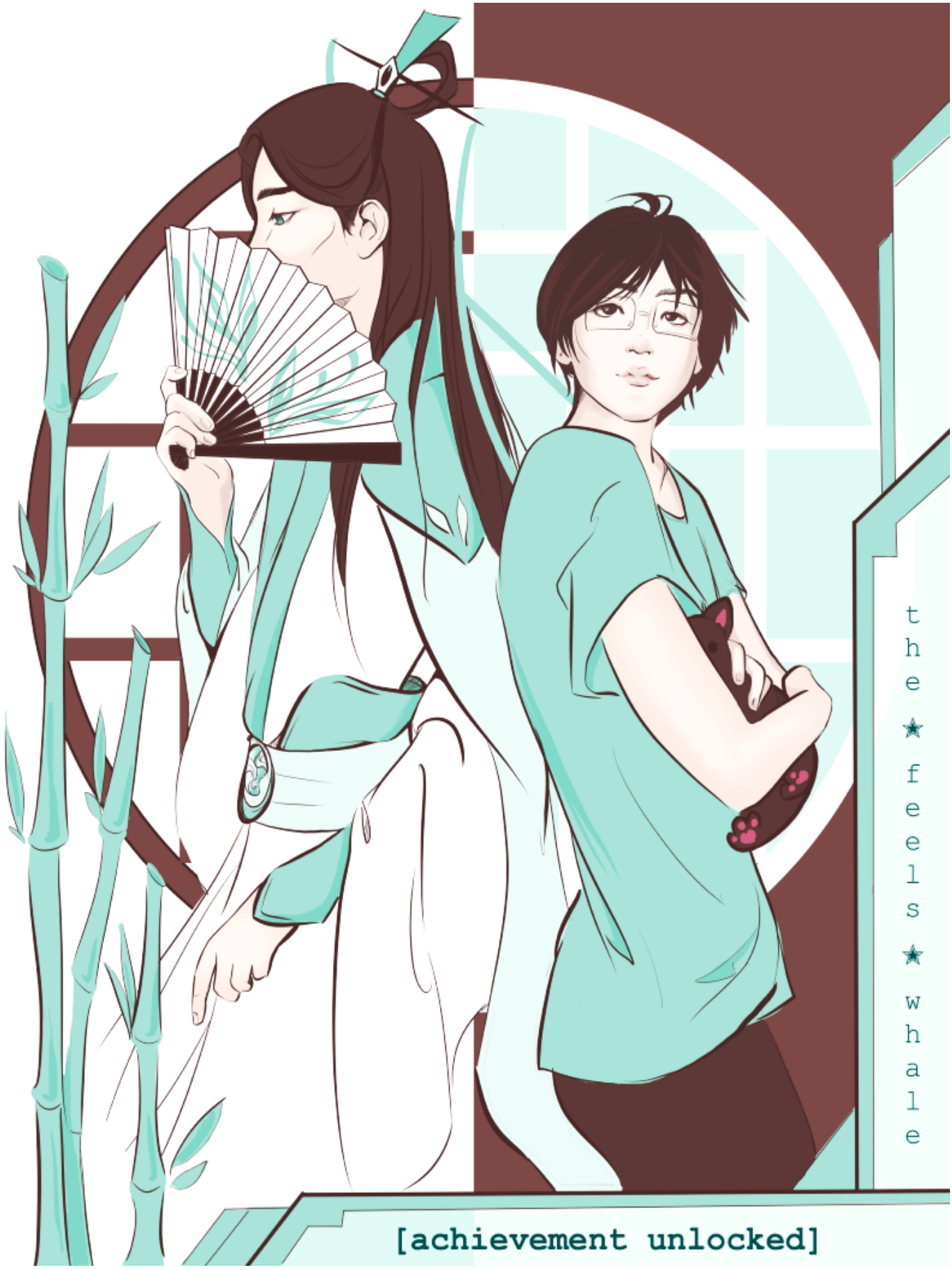
Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


the ★ feels ★ whale
[achievement unlocked]

The bathroom floor never seemed hard or cold until he was stuck on it.

Shen Yuan had, for a long time, believed he'd never be here again or if he ever re-visited this particular circumstance then it'd be on a different floor in a world where laminate didn't even exist.

This was the floor he'd died on --might *still* be dead on, actually.

No… *no.* He wasn't dead. Shen Yuan could feel his ribs expanding and contracting. He was breathing and even though it was a struggle, he could open his eyes a little bit. His limbs and back were just locked up.

It had been hard to remember the exact circumstances of his death while he was still in the world of Proud Immortal Demon Way, but like this Shen Yuan had no problems recounting the ugly particulars.

His struggles with eating -the source of many of poor Ming Fan's trials during the years when Luo Binghe was in the Abyss- weren't new. Shen Yuan had always been a fussy eater as a kid and there was no such thing as inedia in this world. His list of 'safe' foods was short -white rice, soft bread, chicken breast, fruit without skins, and a few vegetables.

Binghe's God Level cooking was the only thing that had ever cut through his automatic instinct to reject anything else. He was able to keep the smells, tastes, and textures that triggered Shen Yuan's gag reflex just within the safe edge of his tolerances, which Shen Yuan hadn't even realized was possible. It probably wasn't without the Protagonist Buff. In his original world, Shen Yuan eventually trained himself to just bolt stuff back like a shot before he could react to anything he couldn't handle. It meant he got more nutrition in his diet, but maintaining a willful blindness about food also meant he sometimes ate things that he shouldn't have.

The food poisoning wasn't what killed him, not directly. It had certainly felt like it at the time and Shen Yuan didn't remember dying *exactly,* but his position on the floor suggested that he'd laid down on the floor after wearing himself out despite knowing that he shouldn't. Worse, he was on his *back.*

There was only one conclusion he could come to. He must have thrown up again in his sleep and drowned in it.

'How is that an even more humiliating death than I thought it'd be?' he wondered. By comparison, sacrificing himself to save someone from a qi deviation was *miles* better.

He squinted around and wondered how he'd gotten back here? Was it another System-induced nightmare? If so, then why? He hadn't heard from it since he got married.

Fuck, if this was real then Binghe was going to take it *so* badly…

'First step...' he told himself. '...get up.'

His fingertips were willing to flex and if he worked at it then his wrists responded a bit. He could turn his head a little. He couldn't see any evidence of livor mortis on the parts of his arms that had been touching the floor either so he hadn't been -- hadn't been *laying there* for long.

If the fucking System sent him back in time to before he'd met his husband after five years of marriage then he would *not* be held responsible for his actions...

Shen Yuan had gotten as far as being able to rotate his wrists and ankles (his knees and hips were locked up too tight to release in a hurry) when there was a crash from deeper inside the apartment followed by a voice that made something he'd been desperately ignoring unclench in the pit of Shen Yuan's stomach.

"SHIZUN?"

Oh thank heaven. Shen Yuan could put up with a lot, but he'd gone through *so much* to end up where he was and he wasn't ready to give it up.

"B-.." Shen Yuan's voice failed him when he tried to call out. His mouth and throat were bone dry. He tried again and what came out sounded more like a creaking door than any sound a human could make. Footsteps pounded towards the bathroom anyway and the door flung open so hard that it came clean off the hinges.

His husband was dressed in his workaday black and gray. Zheng Yang hung on one hip and a re-forged Xin Mo on the other. He blinked down at Shen Yuan without recognition. "Who…?"

Fuck. He'd forgotten. He was wearing his own face.

Shen Yuan tried to talk again, but the noise he made was arguably worse than the last attempt. It did, however, alert Binghe to his distress.

"No, no!" Binghe knelt down and set his swords to the side. "Don't talk. Don't try to talk. Let me help."

Right. Binghe wasn't just a protagonist. He was a *hero*. If he saw a stranger struggling on the floor then of course he was going to try and help no matter what else he had going on personally.

He took one of Shen Yuan's wrists and a tendril of spiritual energy gently probed at him. Shen Yuan was surprised that he could feel it or that Binghe could even do it in this world, but not as surprised as his husband was when he apparently recognized a familiar spiritual constitution in a very unfamiliar body.

Binghe leaned closer, searching Shen Yuan's face. "Shizun?" he asked with the kind of hope that was painful to hear.

Shen Yuan nodded slowly and the breath left Binghe's body in one gusty sigh. His shoulders drooped and he sagged forward, almost bending completely over Shen Yuan's prone form. "Oh, thank you," he wheezed. *"Thank you."*

Then he shook himself and frowned down at Shen Yuan's state.

"Forgive me, but we need to share blood. Shizun is very weak now," Binghe warned him as he bit into the heel of his own palm with his fangs extended.

Given they had worked out all their past misunderstandings, Shen Yuan didn't hesitate to lick that hand when it was held up to his mouth. He'd had three wounds since they'd married that would have been mortal if not for Binghe's blood symbiotes patching him up on the spot and he'd lost

count of the times Binghe had had to use them to track him when he got caught up in a Kidnapped Wife Plot that completing the main storyline hadn't cancelled.

He could feel Binghe's qi ripple through him using the blood as something like a signal booster. The tension in his joints began to ease straight away, but then his arms and legs immediately all cramped at once.

The next fifteen minutes was pure agony. The blood symbiotes were busy so Binghe had to massage Shen Yuan's calves, thighs, and arms out by hand while Shen Yuan endeavored to *not* cry like a baby. He was no stranger to pain, but there was nothing quite like your body turning against you to pile helplessness on top of injury.

The good news was that the blood had lubricated the inside of his mouth and throat a bit so he could make non-horrible noises of assent and encouragement whenever his husband asked 'is this working?' or 'does this hurt?'

The bad news was that Binghe had no idea what it meant when Shen Yuan pointed at the sink.

Well, he came from a very early technology background. For Binghe water came out of wells and was stored in big ceramic reservoirs. Washstands were filled either by servants, disciples, or (as in Shen Yuan's case) territorial husbands.

Eventually he picked Shen Yuan up and carried him over then watched with wide-eyed fascination as Shen Yuan turned the tap and filled a dirty glass with water that he used to wet his mouth.

Hydration and the heroic efforts of his brand new colony of blood symbiotes brought him back to life. Shen Yuan slapped at his husband's massive bicep until Binghe reluctantly put him down.

"B-binghe, what happened?" He finally managed to ask.

His husband cocked his head. "Shizun doesn't remember?" he asked a little too carefully.

Shen Yuan shook his head. "I remember being in our retreat house, but not really what we were doing," he thought hard. "Were you cooking?"

Binghe's face crumpled and he pulled Shen Yuan in for a hug. "Shizun collapsed while I was in the other room. I found you laying on the floor. I thought…" He swallowed. "...I thought you'd *left* again, but your body was breathing. You just weren't in it. Elder Meng Mo found a trail that your spirit left when it departed your body and I came to fetch you. Your other body is with Mu-shishu for the moment." He leaned back to look Shen Yuan over. "Shizun looks *very* different."

"It's okay, you can say it," Shen Yuan managed a crooked smile and pushed his glasses up. "I'm shorter and fat."

Binghe puffed up like an angry cockatiel. "Shizun isn't fat!"

Compared to his body in Proud Immortal Demon Way, which had washboard abs and 8% bodyfat, he was. He hadn't been ashamed of his body before he died, but he'd also just spent something like twenty years looking like a flawless immortal underwear model so coming back to a body with regular proportions and visible pores came as a bit of a blow.

Binghe blushed. “Shizun is beautiful to me like this too." He examined Shen Yuan once again and asked, more cautiously. “Do you *know* this body?”

“I, uh…” Shen Yuan ducked his head. The System was still dead quiet. Was it really *gone?* He and Binghe had had a bunch of physical contact and that was usually all it took to reinstall the damn thing. “...yeah, I do. I think I need to be sitting down for the conversation though, but not in here.”

“I saw chairs of a sort in the other room.” Binghe glanced back the way he’d come. He looped an arm behind Shen Yuan’s shoulders and one behind his knees to lift his husband in a princess carry.

Shen Yuan let himself be carried back into his own living room. He had a lot of space for living in Beijing. The only reason he managed it was because the whole building was family income property and he got the apartment plus a decent stipend in exchange for managing it in addition to a couple other things in the area; that was the benefit of having rich parents and two highly competent older brothers between you and the family business, but also a bunch of communal assets nobody wanted strangers handling. He technically worked for his family, inasmuch as he actually ‘worked.’

Binghe had knocked over and broken an armchair during what must have been an explosive arrival. Shen Yuan also recalled having an end table in the spot currently occupied by a mass of wooden shards and a broken lamp.

He put Shen Yuan down on the cleanest patch of couch and crouched down in front of him. “Shizun?”

Shen Yuan wet his lips. Might as well go for it.“This is *my* body, Binghe; the one I was born in.”

Binghe rocked back on his heels, looking Shen Yuan over all over again; confused, but also kind of hungry-looking in the way he got whenever Shen Yuan accidentally shared something about himself that his husband hadn’t known about, which was admittedly a lot. He hated lying to his husband, but the truth was so stupid it would sound like a lie so Shen Yuan just --didn’t talk about himself. He answered the best he could when Binghe found something to ask about, but Shen Yuan was uncomfortably aware of just how much he left out every time.

He always felt small whenever Binghe got that look; hungry, eager, and like he thought he might be stealing something.

It wasn’t so weird to want to know about your spouse and their history before you came along and Shen Yuan knew *everything* about Binghe, but he still had to maintain a balancing act when it came to ‘pretending to plausibly be Shen Qingqiu.’ Even around his own husband.

He swallowed and nodded. Might as well rip the bandage off.

“Shen Qingqiu died when you were fourteen," he confessed. “I woke up in his body.”

He watched his husband’s face go through a series of contortions and emotions that Shen Yuan couldn’t begin to put a name to. *“When* in the year that I was fourteen?” he asked at last as an ominous stillness settled over him.

“Not really sure.” Shen Yuan rubbed the back of his neck. “It was in the late Spring or early Summer, but it was a while before I had a concrete sense of what the proper date was. This world uses a different calendar now. I do know that you’d been beaten and locked in the woodshed. I…”

He felt an ugly rush of heat as he frequently did when reminded of the Original Goods' past behavior. He didn't mind apologizing for Shen Qingqiu's past behavior, but he was also very aware that couldn't exactly *explain* it either if someone ever demanded his reasons. "...don't really know what that was for."

The tension trickled out of his husband's frame in increments. "I remember it." Binghe was staring at Shen Yuan's knees, lost in his thoughts. "It was because someone left the door to a storage house open and many of the practice instruments warped. Da-shixiong's little goons blamed me and I had no alibi."

"Oh." It hadn't sounded like they'd had any proof either, but the Original Goods wouldn't have cared about that.

"It was the last time any disciple on the Peak was punished with anything worse than running laps, copying, or self-reflection in the mountain shrine, so it was a significant event to me." Binghe shrugged one shoulder as if dismissing the thought. He peered into Shen Yuan's eyes. "Shizun started acting really strangely after that; asking questions he should know the answers to, fainting at random, and Da-shixiong caught you trying to sneak out of your house once with a travel bag. Everyone was very worried."

"Aaah!" Shen Yuan covered his face with both hands. He'd been acting like a crazy person and, worse, they'd *noticed.* "Don't remind me!"

Large, sword-calloused hands pried his fingers away from his eyes and Binghe's unfathomable expression had melted into a kind of helpless fondness when their eyes met once more. "Shizun must have been *very* frightened."

"You don't know the half of it," Shen Yuan muttered and looked away. "I must ask my husband's forgiveness for lying to him for so many years."

Binghe took one of Shen Yuan's hands and took his time examining it. Shen Qingqiu had long-fingered scholarly hands, but he was also a swordsman so they were only delicate in appearance. If you touched his palms, the skin was tough and leathery with the calluses of a veteran warrior. Shen Yuan had the soft hands of someone who'd never done anything more strenuous in his life than a compulsory gym class. Binghe seemed fascinated by the difference. Then he pressed his cheek into Shen Yuan's open palm, followed by his mouth.

"This husband prefers that Shizun kept your silence until now." Binghe closed his eyes and dropped formality once more. "If the other Peak Lords learned of it, if Shizun had been *exorcised* --I don't know what I would have done. If this had happened even a year ago then I wouldn't have known how to *find* you. Elder Mo and I only recently started exploring the liminal edges where our realm meets the void between worlds."

Shen Yuan had his suspicions about how such a reveal would have gone down depending on when his sect siblings learned of his transmigration. Most of the possibilities ended in fire and blood. Didn't he know better than anyone else the lengths they were willing to go to in order to lay their fallen martial brother to rest?

"How did it happen?" Binghe asked. "Why did you become my Shizun?"

"I wasn't asked. It just happened after I…" Shen Yuan's voice cracked. *Wow,* he did not want to talk about this. "...died." He looked back in the direction of the bathroom before thinking better of

it.

Binghe's reaction was everything Shen Yuan feared most. His eyes flashed red. The seal on his forehead burned hot. A pulse of demonic qi flooded the room making the shadows grow darker and every hair on Shen Yuan's body lift up in terror.

Wow, that was *deeply* unpleasant in a mortal body. It wasn't great in his immortal body either, but something in his hindbrain became convinced his husband was about to *eat* him.

Shen Yuan's face must have done something because Binghe's qi vanished in the next second.

"No!" Binghe reached for him. *"No, no, no.* Please don't be scared. I was only frightened!"

"I'm not a cultivator here," Shen Yuan wheezed, but patted his husband's arm in what he hoped was a soothing gesture, for all that Shen Yuan was shaking like a dry leaf. "Binghe's qi just felt different is all and I was surprised. I know you would never harm me."

The word 'again' hung heavy between them and Shen Yuan pushed it away by wiggling forward until Binghe had to let him get into his lap. He couldn't really do this as Shen Qingqiu. He was too tall and bony, but he'd taken note in the bathroom that he came up to *maybe* Binghe's chest like this. Now that he was past being freaked out about his own sexuality (most days) he wasn't about to pass up a chance to indulge in his minor (hardly noticeable) height difference kink.

Binghe fell backwards, landing on his butt, but hauled Shen Yuan in with enthusiasm once he realized what was going on. After a moment of that his arms tightened.

"Shizun… died." Binghe drew in a breath. "How?"

"I ate something bad." Shen Yuan was not about to get into the details. His sticky gray lotus did *not* need any more concrete details about 'ways my husband has died' beyond the plenitude he already had. "I think I got sick in my sleep."

Binghe squeezed him tighter. His voice only shook a little bit when he said, "I will remember that the next time Shizun says you're capable of feeding yourself."

"Mmm." Shen Yuan pressed his face into Binghe's shoulder. "How did Binghe follow me here? Can… can we go back?"

He was surprised to realize how badly he wanted to. For a bullshit universe that was wall-to-wall fuck or die plants and histrionic Jianghu-style mob rule, he'd come to think of it as home despite the lack of modern conveniences. He wanted to see his family if he could and maybe arrange for his body to be found a little easier this time, but he--he *really* wanted to go home. It *was* home now. Even if he wasn't *truly* Shen Qingqiu it'd be okay if Binghe knew that and still wanted him anyway.

Much to his relief, his husband nodded. Shen Yuan felt it more than saw it.

"It may be some time before we can return," Binghe admitted, letting up on his death grip. "Shizun must promise not to be angry."

Oh no. Nothing good ever came of THAT statement.

Shen Yuan pushed away to look his husband right in his guilty little face. *"What did you do!?"* he demanded.

"This husband had to make a deal in exchange for the ability to move between realities and bring people with me," Binghe admitted, going right back into formal language as he frequently did when he was in the doghouse and planned to try and get out of it by being cute. "There's something he has to do in this world; a mission I must complete."

It was worse than he'd thought.

Shen Yuan took his husband's face in both hands and asked in a deathly quiet hush, "Binghe, answer me as best you can *if* you can. *Do important things need to be said three times?"*

The way his husband's eyes flew wide was all the answer Shen Yuan needed.

"H-how do…?" Binghe's cheeks went red and his gaze went distant for a second before *blazing.* Had *Shen Yuan* looked like that when *he* was talking to the System? "Shizun already knows about the System."

Shen Yuan nodded. "It's what put me into Shen Qingqiu's body. I had a mission to complete." His heart was pounding. His husband was at the mercy of the System. He'd never considered the possibility that it might ever sink its wires into Binghe given the way it seemed determined to cater to his story -Abyss plot aside- but it had.

Sure, okay, *fine.* It had saved them both from death that one time, but he wasn't about to forget everything it put them through first!

He hadn't realized that he'd pulled Binghe's head into a crushing, protective hug until his husband tapped lightly on his arm. Shen Yuan lurched backwards and would have fallen off Binghe's lap completely except his husband caught him and put him right back into place.

"Shizun is overwrought," Binghe observed and slid one of his hands up underneath the back of Shen Yuan's shirt. He frowned. "And *cold.* It's not cold in here. Why?"

Shen Yuan coughed. "I… *it* happened in the room where you found me. I probably cooled down before the System put me back in."

His husband's jaw worked and this time it was Shen Yuan being crushed into a hug.

"Binghe…" He squirmed. "...Binghe, listen. This is important!"

"Shizun is trying to distract me." Binghe squeezed tighter.

"No --I mean, *maybe,* but it's still important." Shen Yuan was relieved when Binghe let them look each other in the eyes again. *"Don't* trust it. It has an agenda. It *always* has an agenda. It doesn't *lie,* exactly, but it'll manipulate you however it can. It'll obfuscate the truth, change the rules, and add new variables to its game whenever it wants. It'll give you the illusion of choices, but only let you make the one it wants. Sometimes it'll even control what you're allowed to say. Has it told you what the consequences are if you fail this 'mission'?"

Binghe's look darkened. "If that happens then I will be sent back without my husband and lose the ability to transverse worlds." He reached out to cup Shen Yuan's cheek, "Shizun, did all of that

happen to you?”

Chapter End Notes

LBH is the most intuitive when it is the least convenient for his opponent. SY usually likes that. Usually.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Character Backstory unlocked! Understanding of [UV002] is now at 30%! Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

Luo Binghe ignored the obnoxious glowing square that had been plaguing him since he'd found his husband's vacant body warm and still breathing, but laying on the floor in their sitting room with no spiritual cognition left inside it.

[Complexity Points Awarded! +100. Your total is now 150 C-Points!]

At least he now knew who and what [UV002] was. That was how the System was referring to *Binghe's own husband* so his mission of 'uncover secret transmigrator plotline and flesh out the character wiki' wasn't going to be nearly as hard as he'd feared. *Shizun* was the transmigrator, whatever that was.

There was nothing about Shizun that Binghe didn't want to uncover. After so many years together he hardly knew anything about his own husband that they hadn't experienced together; things Shizun evidently hadn't been *able* to tell him. The System had already throttled Binghe twice when he tried to give his husband more details about what he was expected to accomplish in this strange world they'd been sent to.

30% understanding. What an insult. They'd been married for *five years* and known each other for *fifteen.*

Oddly, he felt a little better knowing that it wasn't anyone's fault but the System's. Shizun *hadn't* been shutting him out despite how it felt sometimes. Shizun was just suffering from his usual catastrophic bad luck. That was at least *one* thing Binghe knew about his spouse.

If his Shizun stood perfectly still in an empty field then surely a wind would come kick up poisonous spores into his face or a monster would fly by and attack for no good reason. Bandits would arrive and, despite Shizun's obvious status as a highly ranked -and therefore extremely dangerous- cultivator, decide to kidnap him for ransom.

If there was anyone who could attract the attention of such a horrible entity as the System while peacefully minding his own business then it could only be Binghe's poor beleaguered Shizun and he'd known that ever since he was a young disciple. To stand by Shen Qingqiu's side meant being ready for the inevitable moment when fate looked at whatever bad circumstances he was in the middle of and decided to make them *exponentially* worse.

Being married to such a person was an exercise in constant vigilance, but sometimes things like *this* managed to get past even Binghe's own admittedly-intense levels of paranoia.

'Your Binghe will make it better,' he promised quietly, refocusing his attention on his spouse. 'From now on, there will be no more reasons to hide.'

Shizun's new face was a lot more emotive than his old one and prone towards brilliant flushes. He was littler like this too; smooth around the middle and his upper arms rather than defined, with less muscle mass, and he had a much more delicate bone structure. Binghe was enjoying being able to hold his husband like a soft toy and suspected that he was going to miss this once his husband was safely back in his immortal body.

Shizun was likely a young master, which surprised Binghe not at all. His husband liked his comforts and had clearly never had to keep up with chores that didn't involve studying or cultivation. He was appreciative of those who did and Binghe liked that about him too, because he'd met enough young masters to know that was *not* typical of the breed .

Binghe liked having his cooking praised and the way Shizun had never failed to recognize when the bamboo house had been cleaned by giving him a grateful little squeeze on the shoulder. Unlike anyone else of his social class, Shizun had never taken those things for granted. He accepted Binghe's efforts as a gift and appreciated them every day like it was the first time. That odd habit, one that was both precious and inexplicable at the same time, was at last starting to make sense.

The house they were in was small and there was no sign of servants --or at least he *hoped* there weren't because he would have to fire them all. If someone other than his husband had been keeping up with this place then Binghe didn't want to know about it. It wasn't *dirty,* but it wasn't clean either and therefore was unsuitable to contain his precious spouse. Dust lingered on the flat surfaces and the air smelled strange, clearly the work of an apathetic housekeeper. Ergo, Shizun *had* kept up with his own space in the past and was informed enough to appreciate Binghe's hard work.

[Character Backstory unlocked! Understanding of [UV002] is now at 31%! Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

"That's enough from you," he muttered and then winced as he glanced over at his husband. That had probably sounded unkind.

Interestingly, Shizun didn't even seem to notice that he'd said anything. Shizun was subtly examining himself, reviewing a body he hadn't occupied in years. Maybe he was distracted, but Binghe had spoken practically in his ear and yet he showed no reaction.

That was alarming. Was that something the System had done? If so then what had *Binghe* missed in the past when Shizun was wrangling with this monstrous entity?

He *now* knew that his husband loved to complain in the face of stress, but that was a *very* recent discovery. He'd assumed it was because his husband was finally getting comfortable enough with their marriage to start to show Binghe his less attractive sides (as though any part of Shizun was unattractive, including the foot-stomping tantrums he threw when he thought no one was looking) but maybe he'd been getting it all out by shouting at the System where no one could hear him.

Binghe didn't like that. What *else* had he missed?

"Shizun," he asked again. "Did that happen to you?"

Binghe's husband lingered stubbornly before he gave in and nodded in response.

It was the answer Binghe had expected, but getting confirmation still curdled his insides. *"When?"*

There'd been multiple times in their shared past when Shizun's behavior had mystified and enraged him; arguments they'd have, but wouldn't have needed to if only Shizun had opened up enough to give Binghe the flimsiest excuse. Even now, Binghe didn't think his husband realized the degree to which Binghe would forgive him for *anything,* just so long as Shizun acted the slightest bit sorry for it. It hadn't been a problem since they'd married. Shizun had reverted to the kind and considerate person Binghe had fallen for as a boy. They hadn't had another fight beyond some minor domestic fussings that resolved themselves with a little time for both parties to cool down. Neither of them had needed to run away or die about it.

Those old memories still bothered Binghe sometimes, though, even though he'd forgiven Shen Qingqiu for his part in all of that ages ago and he did his best not to think about it, but --wouldn't it be even better if it had all been a misunderstanding? Binghe didn't want their old fights to have been anybody's fault. He *really* wanted everything that went wrong between him and his husband to have been a misunderstanding or, preferably, the malicious interference of an evil god that he could go kill when he had a minute.

"In the Water Prison. When you asked me if I regretted it," Shizun admitted, shamefaced. "It made me choose between three dialogue options and staying silent was the least frightening to me at the time." His lips thinned as he looked up at Binghe. "I did," he said suddenly. "Regret it. I regretted it as soon as I'd done it. I think I must have said so since, but Binghe should know that I regretted everything and would have given anything to undo what I had done."

Binghe's memories of the time immediately before Shizun's death -- *second* death were notoriously unreliable. That had been before he'd realized the extent to which Xin Mo could influence his moods and judgement. Shizun had tried to warn him, but Shizun himself hadn't been in a very credible place and he *also* was apparently being actively undermined by the System at the time for some reason.

Even if Shizun had confirmed for Binghe that he regretted pushing him into the Abyss, there was no telling how Binghe would have reacted in that state. He wasn't sure there was *any* answer that Shizun could have given him that would have calmed the fire raging in Binghe's heart or between his ears back then. Maybe it was better for Shizun to have chosen silence and to save his words for later, when they could actually reach his errant disciple.

"I understand." Binghe meant to make his tone warm and gentle, but it came out as vaguely murderous. Oh well. He took a breath to say --well, *something,* but was interrupted by the sound of music coming from somewhere.

The source turned out to be a shiny little black… *thing* sitting on the low table in front of Shizun's lounging furniture. Binghe watched in curiosity as his husband cursed, picked it up, and it *lit up* in Shizun's hands. Hadn't he just said he wasn't a cultivator in this world? If he wasn't a cultivator then how was it doing that?

To his surprise there were *words* on the glossy surface. 'Er-Ge', it read, followed by a string of numbers and some red and green emblems. It resembled the System in a way, except they could both see it. Shizun had been the first one of them to interact with it. Had the System modelled itself off of an object familiar to its first host? Maybe.

Shizun held a finger up to his lips requesting silence and tapped the green emblem. The device immediately began to project the sound of a man's voice. It must have been a communication

artifact of some kind except it was *re-usable.* Binghe was going to have to investigate that thing later.

“FINALLY he answers his phone!” ‘Er-ge’ shouted. There was something familiar about the voice, but Binghe couldn’t quite pin it down. “I have been calling all morning. Mom is convinced you’re dead in a ditch and Da-ge isn’t far behind her. They have been making my life hell. What the hell is wrong with you?”

[Wiki update! New Character Identified! Character Stub for ‘Er-Ge’ has been unlocked. Character Stub for ‘Da-ge’ has been unlocked. Character stub for ‘Mom’ has been unlocked. Develop these relationships further in order to learn more!]

“A-ah!” Shizun colored again. He was no better at dealing with conflict in this body than in the other and here he had no fan to shield his face or glare over. Binghe opened his mouth to put the loud man in his place, but his husband put a hand over his mouth and shook his head. “I got sick last night and my phone was in the living room. I’ll text them right away so they know I’m okay.”

“I already did," ‘Er-ge’ snapped. “I have you on speaker. I am on my way now and I’m throwing away *everything* in your fridge.”

There didn’t seem to be any illusions on Er-ge’s part about how or why Shizun had gotten sick. This must have happened before. Binghe was going to have to find this ‘fridge’ and have a look at it.

“Jiu-ge don’t drive when you’re mad *or* text while you’re driving," Shizun sighed. “You’ll speed and get another ticket.”

[Wiki update! Character stub for ‘Er-ge’ has been expanded!]

[Name: Shen Jiu. Role: Second son of the Shen family. Connections: Older brother to [UV002] and [Character Locked!] Younger brother to [Da-ge]. Son of [Mom] and [Character locked!] Weapon: Force of Personality(always equipped.) Unique Skill: Chilling Gaze]

Binghe winced as the System chimed in with multiple updates. This was going to get tiresome if it happened *every* time he encountered someone new.

Wait… Shen *Jiu?*

He stared at his husband, who was distracted by his ‘phone.’ Wasn’t Shen Jiu *Shizun’s* name?

“You’ll get another ticket!” Shen Jiu snapped. “A-Yuan, you are on my *second-to-last nerve.”*

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

Oh no, not *this* again.

The last time it had said that was when Binghe had triggered it attempting to cross the Void Between Worlds on his own. He’d never planned to repair Xin Mo after he destroyed it, but the shards started to warp reality around them and fixing it became less of a matter of preference and more of a necessity for anyone who wanted to keep living within ten thousand li of it. The reforged Xin Mo was significantly less powerful than the original. It was no good as a weapon since the blade chipped at the slightest provocation and refused to hold an edge, but Xin Mo had retained its

portal ability and no longer tried to drive Binghe insane so in some ways it was actually *more* useful than it had been. Binghe still had Zheng Yang for combat.

Binghe cut his way through the boundary of their universe with the Xin Mo sword, only to find himself in an illusory room not unlike an unfurnished dreamscape. His portal closed behind him without his permission and he was confronted by a glowing panel floating in the air, totally unsupported.

The floating square greeted him in an inflectionless and androgynous voice.

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Through luck and the deployment of a specialty designation, User [Luo Binghe] has successfully avoided automatic spiritual annihilation. Caution: specialty designation will not protect User from the consequences of any further unauthorized attempts to exit your native universe. Please return to your narrative setting.]

Binghe had hunted in vain for an alternate source of the voice, but was forced to admit that the little glass panel was talking to him. Was it a god? Was it a monster? It didn't seem hostile, more like a bored city guard. Still, it was keeping him from being able to retrieve his Shizun. He was going to have to figure out a way past it.

"You said 'unauthorized'," Binghe said. "How do I get authorization? My husband was taken. His body is empty, but alive. I need to retrieve his soul and I followed his trail here."

The panel's steady glow fluttered for a second, giving it the eerie appearance of having just *blinked* at him.

[...]

The panel displayed a series of bouncing dots. Perhaps that's what it did when it was thinking about something.

[Analysis complete. Confirmed: the role of [Shen Qingqiu] is currently unoccupied. Quick Diagnostic reveals that the soul occupying [Shen Qingqiu] was released from the universe due to an expired permissions error. It has been diverted to another realm.]

Hope had flared briefly in Binghe's heart. "Can you bring him back? He doesn't belong there. He belongs here."

[...]

The panel 'thought' for a long while before it spoke again.

[Recall process failed. Manual retrieval required. Error: no agents are on hand to accept the quest.]

"Well then send me!" Binghe cried. What 'no agents on hand?' He was standing right there!

[Analysing… request accepted. Generating new quest chain. Tagging new user as Host. Tethering User to home universe for future retrieval. Installing local instance of The System.]

A smaller panel appeared directly in front of Binghe's face and the larger one faded away.

[Activation code: ⌈Then Send Me!⌋ Accepted. Welcome to the System! This System is based on the concept⌈YOU CAN YOU UP. NO CAN NO BB!⌋We look forward to providing you with the best

service! It is our sincere hope that, through grit and fortitude, you can achieve your goal.]

[Goal: User [Luo Binghe] will perform a manual retrieval of the soul formerly bound to the role [Shen Qingqiu.]

Again, he had just enough time to get excited before the screen flashed red.

[Error. Quest as-is designates too many potential targets. All targets have been overwritten as native to their environment. Bug report submitted. Analysing… analysis complete. Revising quest chain.]

The panel turned pale blue again and chirped at him.

[New Mission Assigned! ⌈You Better Come Get Your Man⌋]

[Conditions for success: Return the soul of your spouse to your home universe.]

[Conditions for failure: Reduce C-Points to below Zero (0) before obtaining Required Mission Items.]

[Required Mission Items: Two (2) of the following - a permanent multiverse visa and/or guest pass. Note: at least one permanent visa is required in order to activate a guest pass. User [Luo Binghe] must obtain either one (1) permanent visa and one (1) guest pass or two (2) permanent visas in order to successfully clear the mission. Obtaining two (2) guest passes and no visas will result in Mission Failure.]

[Penalty for Mission Failure: User [Luo Binghe] will be returned to designated native universe and barred from all future multiverse travel. The vegetative body of [Shen Qingqiu] will expire and be locked from any further attempts at resurrection.]

The stakes were high as Binghe understood it. The System had an unfamiliar style of communication, but he could more or less follow along.

“How do I obtain these ‘permanent visas’ and ‘guest passes?’” he asked slowly. He could guess what a ‘guest pass’ was, but ‘visa’ wasn’t a term he was familiar with.

The panel chimed again.

[Mission includes two side quests. Visas and guest passes will be issued as rewards for completion.]

[Side Quest 1:⌈Uncover the Secret Transmigrator Plotline!⌋Rewards: One (1) Permanent Visa at 50% completion. One (1) Permanent Visa at 100% completion.]

[Side Quest 2:⌈Flesh Out the Character Wiki!⌋Rewards: One (1) Guest Pass at 80% completion. Rewards: One (1) Guest Pass at 100% completion.]

“What is a transmig…” was about as far as Binghe got into his question before the barren room started to dissolve around him.

[Initiating transfer! Starting C-points: 100] the box declared. [Mission start!]

Then it dumped him -at high speed- into Shizun’s little sitting room. He’d thought that was the last he’d see of it --until *now,* that is, as the glowing square sprang back into existence right in front of

his face.

[Wiki update! Character Page for [UV002] has been expanded!]

[User has been awarded 50 C-Points! C-Point total is now 150!]

Binghe's heart stilled in his chest.

[Name: Shen Yuan. Role: Prince Consort of the Demon Realm. Lord of Qing Jing Peak. Chief Strategist of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. Third son and Property Manager of the Shen Family. Transmigrator - Bound Role: Shen Qingqiu. Personal Connections: Husband to Luo Binghe. Older Brother to [Character Locked!] Younger Brother to [Da-ge] and Shen Jiu. Son of [Mom] and [Character Locked!] Sect brother to the Peak Lords of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. Weapon: Xiu Ya (not equipped.) Unique Skill: We're Friends Now.]

"Oh, who's on the last one?" Shizun -Shen *Yuan*- asked, clearly baiting his older brother.

"Your fucking occupational therapist whose fault this all is," Shen Jiu ground out. "Where are my keys? DA-GE, WHAT DID YOU DO WITH MY KEYS?"

"Oh, good. You're not in the car yet. Don't come over. I have a friend visiting," Shizun managed to slip a word in. "He already checked the fridge and threw out the bad stuff. I'm okay, I just slept through the phone ringing. Aren't you supposed to be at work soon?"

"I'm my own boss. I can do what I want," was the waspish response he received. "What *friend?* You can call a friend to help you, but you can't call your own brother? Is that it?"

"He was coming over anyway. Go to work, Jiu-ge, or I'll call Dad."

Binghe closed his eyes as the System got *very* excited about unlocking an empty character stub for 'dad' whose existence Binghe had been able to infer for himself, thank you.

"You snitch!"

"Have a good day in the office," Shizun said sweetly. Binghe was *intimately* familiar with the tone his husband got when he was done with a conversation and had decided to be an asshole about it. Usually only Shang-shishu merited that treatment and it was very strange to hear it coming out of an unfamiliar face. "I need to text Mom and Meimei. Don't come over. I won't buzz you in. Bye!"

Again, the System was very happy to announce that a stub had been created for [Meimei], which at least gave him the information that his husband's final sibling was a sister.

Shizun tapped at the luminous surface of his phone. The communication talisman could apparently recreate letters --*instantly,* he realized, when his husband's terse note to the two women was responded to at once with similarly brief notes and little illustrations of smiling faces.

They seemed easier to placate than Shen Jiu. Binghe guessed, since Shizun seemed surprised by none of it, that 'Jiu-ge's' outrage on their behalf had been fabricated as camouflage for his own distress. Cute.

Finally the phone went dark again and Shizun realized he'd been holding Binghe's mouth the entire time. Binghe himself didn't mind. He liked any and all touching they did, but especially this kind. He snuck in a kiss against Shizun's palm before his thin-faced love snatched it back.

An old, familiar, and sticky-sweet sensation was pooling in his veins as he repeated the name ‘Shen Yuan’ to himself.

He’d tried to call his husband ‘Jiu’ all of once, shortly after they married, and the reaction he got convinced him to never ever try it again. He even told himself he understood it at the time. The only person Binghe had ever heard use the name ‘Shen Jiu’ aloud was that Qiu Haitang and Binghe didn’t want to have to think about her either.

Shizun would have let him if he’d insisted. Shizun *always* let him, but it had been clear in the sudden hunch of his shoulders and thinning of his lips that he *didn’t* like hearing that name. Binghe didn’t want that. Shizun didn’t confront uncomfortable feelings. He bore under them until no one was watching and then he ran for it. Binghe had wanted the intimacy of using Shizun’s name the way Shizun used his, but if he didn’t like ‘Jiu’ then that name was dead to Binghe. At least half of loving that man was creating a space where he didn’t feel like he needed to escape. Yet here, *at last,* was the reason.

Of course he didn’t want to be called Shen Jiu. *It wasn’t his name.*

“Yuan?” Binghe tried it out loud. If his brother could say it then surely his husband could.

This time the reaction was everything Binghe had ever wanted from his spouse. Shizun’s mouth dropped open in a perfect little circle of shock. His eyes flew wide and his pupils dilated. Through their blood connection he felt his husband’s body temperature rise along with certain other things that Binghe usually had to work a little harder for. *Very* interesting.

Shizun straddled his lap and certain parts of Binghe’s own constitution were reminded that his husband had a *whole new body* that he hadn’t made love to yet.

“Say that again," Shizun breathed.

“Shen Yuan," Binghe repeated himself, more confident now. “A-Yuan. *My* Yuan.”

Shizun leaned into him and shivered. That was a *very* good sign. “I didn’t realize how badly I needed to hear you say that.”

Binghe was twenty-nine. They’d met, even though he hadn’t realized it at the time, when Binghe was fourteen. Had his husband not heard his own name in *fifteen years*? Well, *that* was at an end.

‘My poor love.’ Binghe thought and pulled him in for a savage kiss so neither of them had to think about their feelings anymore. All these were things his Binghe could and *would* fix with *joy.* He hated the circumstances that started this journey, but he couldn’t hate the opportunity to uncover these precious pieces he’d been missing from his puzzle of a spouse.

It was just as well he had no idea where the bedchamber in this strange dwelling was. Shen Yuan was pulling at his clothes and cursing him for wearing so many layers, a surefire sign that his Shizun was in no mood to be relocated.

No matter. The floor here was plenty soft and Shizun liked being fucked against a semi-firm surface best.

Binghe set about doing exactly that.

Chapter End Notes

We'll be swapping perspective between our two protagonists. Most of the story will be from LBH's POV since he's the one hearing the System, but SY has an equal voice here.

SQQ doesn't talk about himself so you can't tell me that LBH hasn't been starving to know more about his husband.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The worst thing about being sent back to the apartment you occupied when you were a twenty-two year old virgin and thought you were straight was that there was nothing in the house that made for an even *slightly* viable substitute for lube. There was lotion, but Shen Yuan hadn't even liked that for solo experimentation; much less accommodating someone the size of his husband.

They had done more with less early on in their marriage --until Binghe came home from an adventure that had forced him to work with a male prostitute who -according to scuttlebutt from the juniors who'd accompanied him on that field trip- hauled off and *slugged* him at one point.

Shen Yuan had never been made privy to the exact reason, but given the fact that his husband came back from that adventure with a bunch of recipes and a sudden *burning* interest in salve making he felt like he could venture a guess.

Still, the lotion was good enough for some things and Shen Yuan never said no to intercrural after they'd figured out what that even was. You'd think that with as much porn as he read he'd have known more about non-penetrative sex, but losing his virginity and developing an active sex life had taught him that a lot of the erotica he'd read wasn't very good sex. He had kind of known that already, but having the knife twisted in his wound wasn't exactly *fun.*

Bad news, his original body did not have nearly the same stamina he'd had as Shen Qingqiu so he was barely conscious when his husband hauled them into the bathroom and put his boneless body into the tub. Fortunately touching the cold porcelain woke him up enough to work the taps before Binghe had to try and figure it out himself. His apartment was *super* nice, but getting the right ratio of hot and cold water for a good bath was still an art that his hands remembered even if his head didn't.

"Shizun will have to explain how the water is being heated later," Binghe said with approval as he slid into the tub behind Shen Yuan. He said a silent prayer of gratitude to his mother who hadn't even bothered to listen when he tried to convince her to let him take one of the smaller studio apartments and rent this one out.

'It'll go to waste,' he'd said. 'I only take showers,.'he'd said.

Now he had a giant husband to soak with. Showers? Don't know her.

Shen Yuan of the past was a fool --and that became suddenly very apparent after they were done cleaning up and Shen Yuan was forced to confront the state he'd left his bedroom in.

It wasn't bad, but it wasn't *good* either.

His laundry basket was overflowing because past Shen Yuan didn't do laundry until he ran out of underwear. The bed wasn't made because he rarely got visitors and he probably wouldn't have been able to remember the last time he changed the sheets even before he died. That phone call with Jiu-ge made it clear very little time had passed in his homeworld. His family had only just started to get worried about his extended silence, which never took long.

Shen Yuan folded into himself as he started remembering the contents of his closet where all his merch got stuffed so he could pretend he hadn't bought it. He was going to have to find an excuse to be alone in the room and throw everything out the window first chance he got.

Binghe squinted at the overflowing laundry basket, lifted a corner of the bedding to sniff at it, and got That Look; the one that said *nothing* would be happening in this room until it had been made fit for habitation. Shen Yuan had gotten lucky with the living room and the bathroom. Those places were relatively tidy because he didn't spend much time there, but the bedroom was what made his husband draw a line in the sand.

"A-Yuan, *please* tell me you don't pay anyone to look after this house," Binghe asked, pained.

He cleared his throat. "No, no. It's just, um, me." His parents had *wanted* him to hire a housekeeper, if only so there was someone who could check on him regularly, but money spent on a cleaning service was money that came out of his entertainment budget. Now he regretted not listening. "Here, I'll get fresh linens."

He took the laundry basket with him, hoping his husband hadn't noticed. It was a futile hope because Binghe followed him out of the room and watched silently as he dumped it all into the washing machine. Seeing the way he jumped when it started up was funny enough to make Shen Yuan feel a little less embarrassed about how he'd once lived when there was no husband around to hog all the chores.

"What is this?" Binghe asked, squinting at it with deep suspicion.

"A clothes washer and dryer." he explained. "It's fed by the same plumbing as the bathroom and kitchen."

"No water carrying or talismans," Binghe mused as he ran his fingertips across the gently vibrating machine. "Is this a rare artifact?"

"No, sophisticated machines like this are pretty common in this world," Shen Yuan thought about his phone and got it out. "Here, I'll give you some context. This is a mobile phone. Nearly everyone has one, but it's way more advanced than the washing machine. My washer is actually kind of old. There are newer, better ones available but I never bothered with it since this worked fine."

Well, it didn't work exactly fine. It wasn't very efficient and the dry cycle had to be run twice, but he'd justified it to himself by saying that spending money on a washer meant spending less money on his hobbies and how often did he do laundry anyway? He was paying for that attitude now. He'd always been braced for the day when Binghe realized that he'd married a garbage person and here it was.

Binghe just nodded and continued to stick close as Shen Yuan fetched new sheets and his spare blanket.

They'd had already stripped the bed and left the linens in a pile in the hallway where neither of them would have to look at it -a grand concession from his perfectionist spouse- so Shen Yuan was able to remake the bed with ease and only had to pause for a few seconds each time to explain the elastic corners and what memory foam was.

“Is it safe?” Binghe asked with deep suspicion as he watched the hand-shaped indentation he’d left in the top of the mattress slowly fill back in.

Shen Yuan slumped into bed and pulled his husband in after. Binghe’s eyes flew wide open as he rolled over onto his back and then fluttered shut as he took in the sensation. “This husband will deal with the consequences if it is not." He groped blindly for Shen Yuan’s waist, tugged him in, rolled again, and trapped him half under Binghe’s bulk so Shen Yuan was caught between him and the wall.

Shen Yuan had never once shared this bed with another person and he was glad that Binghe was the first one. Qi began circulating through his body and Shen Yuan poked his husband in the ribs. “Rest," he chided. “I’m fine.”

“You’re still shaking off rigor mortis," Binghe grumbled into the top of his head. “I recognize it. It comes back. You’ll stiffen up again as soon as you stop moving.”

Well --he would know, wouldn’t he? He’d spent *years* fighting the decay of Shen Qingqiu’s abandoned body.

Shen Yuan tightened his hold on his husband. “I’m sorry," he said quietly, “for leaving you that way.”

They’d never really discussed it before, but present circumstances seemed to be pulling open a lot of their old wounds.

“Shizun came back," Binghe said. “That’s all that matters," he was quiet for a few beats. “Shizun, why *were* you brought to my world?”

He couldn’t help it. He flinched.

Binghe answered himself. “It was the Abyss.” His fingers flexed at Shen Yuan’s back. “Shizun could never answer me on that score, but it was the System. Shizun has never lied to me. You’ve only ever avoided answering me on that one subject. If you couldn’t give me a straight answer then --it was the System that made you do it. Wasn’t it? You said you had a mission too. That was it. It was *me.”*

Shen Yuan had been avoiding that topic on purpose, but trust Binghe and his Protagonist-level intuition to have figured it out anyway.

“Mn.” His throat began to ache. “I-I didn’t want to. I knew you’d survive it and become stronger than anyone else, but I still didn’t want…and after...”

Well, Binghe already knew how he’d handled the business of ‘after.’ After everything was over and done with, Binghe told him that Ning Yingying and Ming Fan had thoroughly ratted him out; every embarrassing detail.

The arms around him tightened to just barely shy of crushing. *“Why?”* His husband asked, agonized.

“I…” Shen Yuan swallowed. “...Shen Qingqiu wasn’t supposed to die. If he’d lived then he would have chosen to throw you in. You two were never going to get along. He saw too much of his real self in you and couldn’t bear it. Then he got sick and died and the System brought me there to take

his place. It let me make some of my own choices after a while, but not *that* one. The point penalty was more than I could collect. It was adamant that you were meant to find Xin Mo and bring it out into the world. You couldn't do that without…" he trailed off as his husband curled around him, "...I'm sorry," he whispered.

It was hard to say anything more after that.

Binghe did not sleep. Shizun tried to stay up with him, but his body had spent most of the day *dead* and the blood parasites were working hard inside him. They didn't pull on his mortal constitution much, but there was some inevitable drain on his already flagging energies. Binghe bolstered him where he could, but also used his Dream Arts to nudge the man into a restful sleep. It took very little effort. Shizun was a sleepy person in any body.

"System," he addressed the empty room and the glowing panel appeared. So he *could* call on it. "Did he ask if there was a way to keep from sending me into the Abyss?"

The System didn't make him clarify who.

[Cross referencing; information available. Cost: 10 C-Points. Spend points? 150 C-Points available.]

He sneered at the wall. Shizun *had* warned him, hadn't he? It really *was* going to use every opportunity to reduce his total points to zero. It didn't even have to do anything drastic if he let it bleed him slowly like this.

"Never mind," he buried his face in his husband's now-short hair as the square winked out. He didn't need external verification. In a way he'd just gotten his answer regarding who was trustworthy and who wasn't. Hadn't he made the decision long ago to keep his Shizun no matter what?

He'd had a taste of life without his other half, eight years in all. No more.

The night was long, but also not still. It was never perfectly quiet in this strange place. Noises he had no name for seeped into the quiet house. All the windows were sealed with complicated shades that Binghe hesitated to try and open. Shizun didn't seem concerned so Binghe chose to follow his lead and left the question of what his husband's world looked like outside this little pocket of privacy for the morning when they were both rested.

He slipped out of bed to prowl around the house for a bit as the night wore on. Shizun didn't stir. He hardly ever did and it gave Binghe a chance to examine this strange place in private.

The house was a series of rooms arranged around a small open air courtyard that was lined with pale gravel and a raised wooden platform that had been stained a pale shade of honey. There were no plants there, which seemed odd given how much his Shizun liked being surrounded by green things.

The small central courtyard provided light and air to all the other rooms save the bathing chamber, all of which he toured in turn. Not all of them had windows other than the impossibly large panes of clear and uniform glass that screened in the courtyard. In fact he became certain that only the living room and bedroom had external walls. He could hear faint sounds of other occupants through the walls in the bathing chamber, the kitchen, and what he had tentatively identified as Shizun's

private study despite the fact that this house did not seem to connect to those spaces at all beyond shared walls.

It suggested that this building was shared by other people like a tenement or dormitory house. At first he'd thought this was like a small courtyard in a larger manor, but then he'd realized he could also hear people through the floor so these living spaces were stacked on top of each other in addition to the sharing walls.

It couldn't be Shizun's family on the other side of those walls, otherwise how could he have died alone and not been found all day? If they could just walk over then they wouldn't have needed to use that communication artifact.

Binghe examined the glass walls of the central courtyard again. They were what was causing him the most confusion in a way.

Surely someone who could afford an Emperor's annual income in glass panes would shy away from sharing a building with strangers. Even an Emperor might not have been able to acquire panes of glass that big and that uniformly clear, whether he could afford them or not. Binghe wasn't sure such a product was even *available* in his world.

Was glass cheaper here, perhaps?

The 'washing machine' told him that this was a very sophisticated society so maybe they'd refined other crafts to be faster and less expensive. Glass of this quality appeared to be *everywhere* in the house -not just the courtyard walls- so it stood more to reason that glass was easier to get here rather than the Shen family being as eye-wateringly wealthy as he'd first supposed.

He made his way back into the kitchen, but it was just as alien to him on the second attempt as it had been the first time. The cupboards were easy enough to figure out. He opened one by accident by tapping at the top and then when he pushed it shut it caught itself at the last second and then slowly eased itself closed so as not to make a noise. When he pressed it again it popped open a few inches still without making a sound.

The contents were recognizable at least. Pots, pans, and knives could only be improved so much, although the quality of his husband's kitchenware made Binghe's greedy heart beat faster. They'd be taking *all* of that with them when they left. Even if Binghe acquired the ability to bring them back here he still wanted it for his kitchen in the house they'd built by the river that belonged only to them.

Binghe was certain he'd identified the range; a strange smooth black surface (yet more glass) with little circles on it. There was probably an array somewhere out of sight that heated those circles, but he couldn't figure it out and was loath to wake his husband up so he could explain.

What he presumed was the 'fridge' came last; it was a free-standing wardrobe of sorts that hummed eerily, but was cold inside. He only identified it because there was perishable food inside and he understood at once why Shen Jiu was losing his mind over what was in there. The cold might slow down decay, but some of the things in there had been around long enough to grow fuzz anyway. In the morning he'd make his husband's lie into a truth, just as soon as he understood where to dispose of things. He could guess all on his own that their immaculate little courtyard was no place for a burn pile.

There'd be no breakfast when Shizun woke, unfortunately. Not today at least. That was annoying, but unavoidable.

Still, having investigated their new premises made it easier to relax when he returned to bed, especially after Binghe's husband wormed into his chest with an incoherent, but grumpy noise that Binghe knew and loved more every time he heard it.

"System," he said. "Show me the 'character wiki.'"

He'd been assuming that was some physical object, but he'd had a little revelation while investigating the house. The System had described it as having *pages* and even displayed them on its phantom surface. It updated the contents of those pages when Binghe himself learned something new.

Sure enough, the glowing panel displayed a list for him. Most of the lines contained recognizable names from his life and acquaintanceship. Interestingly, his name was first among them. There was a note up to the top left of the panel that read: SCUM VILLAIN SELF SAVING SYSTEM OFFICIAL CHARACTER WIKI IS 70% COMPLETE.

Only a few entries towards the end were marked 'Character Locked!'

"Show me the page for 'Luo Binghe,'" he ordered and the glowing square expanded to show him something not unlike an open scroll. If he touched it then he could advance through the text although, admittedly, there was not much there to flip past.

[Name: Luo Binghe. Role: Saintly Ruler of the Demon Realms, Huan Hua Palace Master, Elder of Qing Jing Peak. Personal Connections: Husband of Shen Yuan (Shen Qingqiu). Sworn master and personal friend of Mobei-jun. Shidi of Ning Yingying. Shizhi to the Peak Lords of Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. Son-in-law of [Mom] and [Dad.] Brother-in-law of [Da-ge], Shen Jiu, and [Meimei.] Weapons: Zheng Yang (not equipped) and Xin Mo (not equipped.) Unique Skill: Crocodile Tears.]

Crocodile tears? He wondered what those were. "Show me the entry for Ning Yingying."

The contents of her listing were even briefer even though Binghe himself could have filled an entire book with the details of her life.

[Name: Ning Yingying. Role: Senior disciple of Qing Jing Peak. Connections: Favored disciple of Shen Qinqiu and Shen Yuan. Shijie of Luo Binghe. Shimei of Ming Fan. Weapon: Shoujia (equipped.) Unique Skill: It Got Worse.]

Out of curiosity, he checked a few more listings. None contained any surprises. It really was populated from what he himself knew. Only the 'unique skills' gave him any pause. Sometimes they made sense to him. Other times they didn't. Liu-shishu's Unique Skill was 'Strong Like Bull, Dumb Like Ox', but Shang Qinghua's was 'Supreme Plot Knowledge' and that made no sense whatsoever.

He managed to snatch some sleep and woke to brighter light streaming in through the central courtyard. Shizun had woken up first for once and had been watching him sleep.

Binghe reached out and dragged his husband down to the mattress. He'd never really thought he'd want any body other than his Shizun's, but then his Shizun developed multiples to choose from and

Binghe found he liked this new option quite a lot. He was softer in every way from the press of his mouth to the quality of his skin. Binghe thought he could lose himself for *days* in the texture of his husband's inner thighs.

He didn't *have* days, unfortunately, but they always had time for a quickie.

Smug and refreshed, he took his still-not-awake and now fucked-out husband back to the bathing room for another soak.

Binghe had to admit he was rapidly becoming very used to the idea of having hot water available at the press of a lever. His A-Yuan didn't let them linger in the water though and surprisingly took the lead on making breakfast.

Shizun took some thick metal disc-like things out of the pantry and a bag of rice. A scoop of the rice went into one of the machines whose purpose Binghe hadn't been able to suss out along with water and salt. He sealed it up and it sang a little song at them before settling down.

In the meantime, Shen Yuan pried a little tab up on one of the metal things and used it to pull the top layer of it all the way off. The metal thing turned out to be a hermetically sealed container of preserved fruit; it smelled like peaches harvested at the peak of the season. Shen Yuan opened a few of those 'cans' and emptied the contents of both into individual bowls for them.

They ate the fruit while waiting on the rice, which turned out a bit mediocre. The cooking was fine and Binghe was an instant convert, but he hadn't realized it wouldn't *wash* the rice and Shizun didn't think about those things so the end result was a little sticky. Binghe had eaten far worse things in his life than a perfectly edible meal made for him by his own husband in an alien world so he didn't care.

A-Yuan was still groggy, which was maybe understandable for a man occupying a body that had been dead just yesterday. From what Binghe had learned about his husband's last resurrection, the sacred coffin had taken a few days to work between the time when Shen Yuan's plant body dissolved and he woke up in his previous one. When he had woken up he'd been in perfect condition so it must have kept him asleep while it reconditioned his body for occupation. Perhaps he shouldn't have been surprised that the System wasn't so conscientious.

The blood parasites inside A-Yuan's body reported back as being *intensely* busy so Binghe sent him back to bed once his husband answered some pertinent questions about where garbage went. There was a pail in a false cabinet under the stone worktop and Shen Yuan promised to show him the 'dumpster' when he was ready to remove things from the house.

Binghe cleaned up the contents of the 'fridge'. Nearly everything that wasn't in the part that was cold enough to freeze anything left inside had to go. Most of it was in softsided white containers that Shen Yuan muzzily told him were meant to be discarded. It was smooth and a bit sparkly -both of which were indications of value to him- so he didn't understand it until he found one of the containers had partially dissolved from contact with the decomposing contents and then he did.

From there he tidied up the remains of the table he'd landed on when the System ported him directly into his husband's old home. Most of the house had wood floors which he could sweep and wipe down like any other, but the rug in the 'living room' was attached to the ground somehow. He tried to sweep up the wood fragments too small to find by hand, but had no luck with it.

As he worked another little machine sitting on the floor up against the wall sang out a song for no apparent reason and then started scooting around the floor. Binghe was mystified by what it was doing before he realized it had two little brushes in the front and used them to scoop fine dust and debris into its mouth. It seemed to move around at random until it hit something and had to reorient itself, but did manage fairly decent coverage of the rug where Binghe couldn't clean properly.

"Clever little thing," he mused as he followed it around watching it work.

It wasn't *that* clever, as it turned out.

The little machine encountered a discarded stocking that had escaped both Shen Yuan and Binghe's vigilance, tried to eat it, and began to cry when it couldn't. Binghe picked it up, removed the stocking, and set it back down on its belly. It continued to cry until Shizun came looking for them.

"I forgot about the Roomba," he mused outloud and poked the flashing light on the machine's back. It repeated its little battle song from earlier and went back to eating dirt.

[Congratulations! Achievement Unlocked: So Clean You Could Eat Off It!]

[User has been awarded 50 C-Points!]

[User has earned +20 Reputation with [Mom]!]

[User has earned +10 Reputation with [Dad]!]

[User has earned +5 Reputation with [Da-ge]!]

[User has earned +1 Reputation with Shen Jiu!]

[User's reputation metric with Shen Yuan has been maxed out and no further points can be acquired.]

[User has earned +5 Reputation with [Meimei]!]

Binghe frowned in confusion. "They're not even here? How would they know?"

Shizun blinked at him. Ah, he hadn't addressed the System directly so his husband heard him that time, but his expression cleared after a moment. "It's talking to you?" He guessed.

"I was rewarded with 'points' for cleaning," he looked around, wondering how his husband's family knew what he'd been doing. "It said your family liked that." His expression must have been telling because Shizun laughed at him in sympathy.

"They probably have no idea," Shizun reassured him. "It's more likely you earned those points when I said you'd emptied the fridge yesterday and it's only telling you now. Jiu-ge tells Qi-ge everything and Qi-ge tells the family group chat. It can manipulate you through *when* it gives updates too. Be careful."

[Wiki update! Character stub for 'Da-ge' has been expanded!]

[Name: Shen Qi. Role: First son of the Shen family. Connections: Older brother to Shen Jiu, Shen Yuan, and [Meimei]. Son of [Mom] and [Dad]. Weapon: Inscrutable Mood (always equipped.)

Unique Skill: Am I Smiling Because I'm Happy or Because I Want to Kill You? Have Fun Figuring It out.]

That was mildly alarming, but Binghe dismissed his concern for another time. He called up the Character Wiki and was pleased to see it was up to 73%. He could do this!

"Tell me more about your family?" Binghe asked, chasing a hunch.

Shizun colored again. "I…" He ducked his gaze and rubbed the back of his head. "...should have told you more about them, huh?" He smiled. "They're going to be your family too."

Binghe felt as though he'd been sucker-punched.

He'd not considered that, actually; not even when the System had listed them as his in-laws on his own wiki page. It had also listed the Cang Qiong Peak Lords as his martial aunts and uncles, but they could scarcely occupy the same room as him without swords being drawn before too long if Shizun wasn't around to keep everyone's manners in the forefront of their minds.

That reputation metric --those had been *positive* values. Did that mean *he could win them over?* His heart thumped painfully in his chest.

This was a whole new world. Nobody knew who he was here or who his parents had been. This was --it was a *completely blank slate.*

He could be satisfied forever with just Shizun, but he'd always wanted a big family with siblings and elders and children running around who weren't necessarily all his. The big multi-generational manor houses in his hometown had always looked like heaven to him; places where you never had to be alone and there was always *someone* who wanted your company.

Could he *have* that here? Or even just something close to it?

"You heard Jiu-ge on the phone. He's --like that." Shizun walked over to lean into his side and look up at Binghe with a soft affectionate glow that he wanted to bottle up and keep forever. "He's hard to win over, but loyal to the death once you manage it. Qi-ge is the oldest and closest to Jiu-ge. There's a big age gap between us so they're almost more like uncles than brothers. Mingyu, my little sister, is about five years younger than me."

[Wiki update! Character stub for 'Meimei' has been expanded!]

[Name: Shen Mingyu. Role: Youngest child of the Shen family. Connections: Younger sister to Shen Qi, Shen Jiu, and Shen Yuan. Daughter of [Mom] and [Dad]. Weapon: Poker Face (always equipped.) Unique Skill: Inner Mind Theater.]

"Are your parents very old?" Binghe asked. It sounded like they'd spaced their children out much further than was advisable. His husband had two older brothers to look after them, but Shizun was Prince Consort of an entire realm. Shouldn't he and *coincidentally* Binghe get the privilege of looking after their parents in their twilight years?

Shizun shook his head. "No, they're actually pretty young. Qi-ge, Jiu-ge, and I were all adopted around the same time. Jiu-ge is the only one I'm actually related to by blood. They didn't plan to get pregnant. My mom had some miscarriages when they first got married so they decided to stop trying. Mingyu was a, you know, *happy accident."*

Ah. Binghe deflated a bit. Younger was better, he supposed and tried to cheer himself up. It might even be easier to ingratiate himself with them if that was the case. Old people didn't always like newcomers.

"What are their names?" he poked, this time solely for the wiki percentage. Like he'd ever dare address his in-laws as anything less than Yuefu and Yuemu.

Shizun's gaze narrowed and Binghe knew his husband was onto him. "My mother's name is Bai Huiqing. My father's name is Shen Zhan."

[Wiki update! Character stubs for 'Mom' and 'Dad' have been expanded!]

[Name: Bai Huiqing. Role: Matriarch of the Shen family. Connections: Wife of Shen Zhan. Adopted mother of Shen Qi, Shen Jiu, and Shen Yuan. Biological mother of Shen Mingyu. Weapon: Laser Focus (always equipped.) Unique Skill: Knows What You Did.]

[Name: Shen Zhan. Role: Patriarch of the Shen family. Connections: Husband of Bai Huiqing. Adopted father of Shen Qi, Shen Jiu, and Shen Yuan. Biological father of Shen Mingyu. Weapon: Dad Jokes (always equipped.) Unique Skill: Crouching Moron, Hidden Badass.]

That filled out the wiki to 82%, which wasn't a bad result, although it was odd that the expanded character pages suggested that Shizun didn't have any grandparents still living.

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

[Checkpoint! Character Wiki Completion Percentage exceeds 80%. Reward issued: One (1) Guest Pass.]

[Guest Pass has been added to User Inventory. To activate, verbally direct the System to assign a Pass to your chosen travelling companion. Note: Guest Pass cannot be activated without a Permanent Visa. Guest Pass will return to User Inventory after one (1) use and will need to be reassigned in order to use again. Only one Guest Pass may be activated, per Visa.]

Hmm, no C-Points that time. However, the information about his 'required quest items' was almost more useful than more points.

"What's it got you doing?" Shizun crossed his arms over his chest and looked Binghe over in deep suspicion.

[Warning! Secrecy Restrictions in place! Revealing mission details will result in automatic forfeiture of all accumulated points and Host's instant ejection from this Realm! Automatic mission failure!]

"I can't say," Binghe groused. He was gaining more empathy with his husband's struggles with every passing hour. This was *awful* and he *hated* it. It had been years since he'd tried to keep a secret from his Shizun and he'd never wanted to go back to it.

"Ah," Shizun dropped his arms and came right over to pat Binghe's chest. "Alright, I understand. Ask whatever you need to and I'll tell you what I can."

Binghe indulged in the contact, but forced himself to focus. He hadn't gotten another status update on his progress with the 'secret plotline' despite having uncovered several new things about his

spouse. He'd have to check to see if Shizun was right and the System was fudging its reporting duty. The Character Wiki had lower stakes, but if the System was as manipulative as Shizun implied then it could use those reports to lure Binghe into a false sense of security.

"System, what is the percentage for my other mission?" Binghe asked the room. Shizun continued to be deaf to this conversation.

[Side Quest: ⌈Uncover the Secret Transmigrator Plotline⌋ is 20% complete. Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

Damn. His 'understanding' percentage wasn't the entire metric for the more critical mission or, worse, it was a red herring that the System used to try and mislead him about his progress and Binghe had very nearly fallen for it. The System understood him well enough to know exactly what he'd jump for. Binghe was going to have to be even more cautious of it from now on.

Shizun cleared his throat once the pleasure of touching wore through his thin dignity. "Ah, I came over to measure you for clothes." Binghe noticed his husband was holding a little white reel of thick ribbon. "I like Binghe's current attire very much…" Binghe was wearing the inner pants from the clothes he'd arrived in and nothing else. "...but we need to get food and I don't think Binghe would like being left behind."

No, Binghe would not. He held out his arms in mute compliance.

"Is something wrong with what I had on?" Binghe didn't actually need to be told. He could tell just by comparing his wardrobe to what his husband had on that the clothing he'd brought was all far too elaborate. Shizun was wearing only one layer with minimal ornamentation, no layers, or jewelry. The collar and fastenings of his clothes were different as well. It looked comfortable, but also very *very* different.

"It's old fashioned here," Shizun told him absently and he unrolled the ribbon from its clear container. It was marked with little black ticks. Ah, it was measuring tape. "Some people still wear hanfu, but it's either for formal occasions or performance art."

"Mm." Binghe took special note of the way his husband's gaze lingered along the lines of his collarbones and shoulders. Five years of marriage and Shizun still got flustered by a little skin. It had been worth it to not get dressed this morning. Things got even better, though, when Shizun started to take a measurement along the inside of Binghe's leg and broke off with a squawk.

"Binghe!" He was bright, bright red. "It isn't even *noon* yet! We did it just this morning!"

"You're right." Binghe let his posture go loose and predatory as he knelt down to join his husband on the floor. This was the other half of the reason he hadn't bothered with putting on more than the bare minimum. He hadn't planned to stay dressed for long. "It's been nearly *half a day,* Shizun."

"Beast," Shizun chided him affectionately, but also reached out to pull him down, leaving Binghe with no questions about the warmth of his welcome.

Chapter End Notes

I keep seeing people say that LBH would hate a Roomba and the dishwasher and the laundry machines, and I cannot agree. Especially about the Roomba. It's a little helper that tries its best (which isn't all that great, tbh) and cries when it gets stuck on something. He wouldn't hate it. He'd anthropomorphize it. He'd happily clean up all the spots it missed and tell it what a good job it's doing. That Roomba is his pet now and SY is going to have to replace it overnight like a grade schooler's hamster when the motor dies and hope LBH doesn't notice.

By that same note, LBH is absolutely the spouse who wants new appliances for significant milestones. He has magazines. He reads product reviews. He has EXTENSIVE opinions.

As an excellent buddy of mine put it in chat, LBH is here to make macarons, not to give himself dishpan hands for no reason.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Yuan ended up ordering some sweats on his phone through an on-demand courier service while he lay trapped on the living room floor underneath all two tons of his dozing husband. Binghe's early morning and interrupted night had finally caught up with him after and he dropped off a few seconds after declaring, "I'll draw a bath in a moment."

His eyes fluttered shut before he even finished speaking so Shen Yuan knew to settle in for the duration.

"Brat," he muttered to himself as he smoothed Binghe's hair away from his face. This lack of cultivation was a problem. Normally he was a little better able to wear out his younger spouse when he got like this and, if pressed, could pick Binghe up and move him if he needed to. Shen Qingqiu's body had very little bulk, but high cultivation. What that meant was that Shen Qingqiu was a lot stronger than he looked. The day Shen Yuan realized he could lift Binghe in a princess-carry if he wanted had been a good one for both of them.

Whatever the System wanted, Binghe seemed to be finding it alright so far. He could recognize the little moments of commingled victory and irritation on his husband's face when it checkpointed at him.

'This must be about 'Proud Immortal Demon Way'.' Shen Yuan pillowed his head on one of his arms and used the other to pet his sleeping spouse's hair. The whole situation reeked of 'Extra Content', but where that extra content was coming from was a mystery to him. Shang Qinghua had died in this world. Who was writing it?

Bonus chapters were almost always porn, fleshed out side pairings, and patching up the occasional plothole that the author forgot about in the main content.

He winced.

Alright, some stuff *had* come out between them and they'd generated *plenty* of porn. He wasn't surprised that he hadn't been outed as a transmigrator in the main storyline. Transmigrators hardly ever did get revealed in any book he'd ever read in that genre. Like Shen Yuan, they sort of melded into their new lives and came to own them. That had always kind of bugged him as a reader, but having lived through the experience he could understand a little better how easy it was to just go with it when so little else was under your control.

He was going to have to trust in Binghe. That wasn't exactly a trial, but Shen Yuan struggled with sitting back and letting other people lead at the best of times.

Still, something twinged in his back as he lay on the floor.

'I hope we're getting lots of points for all this papapa.' He thought at the gorgeous man drooling on his bare shoulder. 'This old man's body can't take it! Even if it's the younger model!'

Binghe snorted awake after about an hour and they took another bath. The courier showed up as Shen Yuan was hopping into a pair of his least egregious pants. He had gotten too used to his Xianxia fantasy hanfu stuff where everything on his body was *tailored.* Going back to mass produced ready-to-wear sucked now that he was familiar with the alternative. Everything he found in his closet was boring or baggy or lumpy or scratchy. Had he owned *nothing* that fit in his twenties? Or that wasn't a graphic t-shirt?

The buzzer scared the shit out of both of them. Shen Yuan had forgotten it was that loud and he hadn't thought to warn Binghe about it at all. His husband lurked in the background, watching as Shen Yuan went to the security wall panel that displayed their courier waiting at the elevator.

"The door will open in a sec," Shen Yuan told the kid. "You can leave the bags outside of my apartment."

"Yeah, sure man," the courier assured him. "You don't have to come outside. I got you."

It was surprisingly professional of him, considering Shen Yuan had sent him out for a full change of men's clothing, some super basic groceries, and a giant bottle of premium lube. There was no hiding what was going on in this house so he didn't even try. So long as they didn't have to look each other in the eye, it was fine.

A tap-tap-tap came from the front door, but Binghe held him back when he started to head towards it. His husband stood like a dog who'd just caught a scent, hackles up and ready to defend his yard. "That person isn't leaving," he said quietly.

"This had better not be a house mugger," Shen Yuan grumbled as he went back to the security panel to access the hall camera. He used to think house muggers were the stuff of urban legend, but he'd spent the past fifteen years in the semi-lawless feudal society of Proud Immortal Demon Way. He'd gone from pacificism to 'fuck around and find out' in terms of his thoughts on acceptable levels of self defense. If he saw a gun he was going to let Binghe do whatever he wanted and they'd deal with the body later.

He sighed as they examined the man standing outside their door, who was currently poking through the bags sitting on the ground at his feet.

"I know who that is," Shen Yuan groaned and went to go find an emergency shirt. "You're going to need to hide."

Binghe reacted to that with both affront and a pout that could kill, but Shen Yuan had his number. He responded with his own sad face, which seemed to work a lot better now that he had to look *up* at his husband. He let his lower lip tremble just a little.

"Binghe, Husband doesn't want to have to tell any lies right away. That person is not going to hurt me, but if he sees you he'll make a big fuss and I'd rather we decide together what we're going to tell people. Lay down and pretend to be asleep. I'll get rid of him."

Binghe caved almost immediately. He dragged his feet and stole one last hard kiss, but went.

Shen Jiu looked up from the bottle of Sliquid in his hand with an 'I've got you now' grin when Shen Yuan opened the door.

“Hey," he waggled the bottle. “Got a big weekend planned?” he asked and snickered when Shen Yuan grabbed it from him.

“If you’re going to be a dick can you be the kind of dick that carries stuff in at least?” He complained.

“Sure, sure.” Because Jiu-ge was a huge tsundere, he already had the bags arranged so he could pick them all up at once and bring them inside. He did a quick look about as he entered. “Did you finally hire a maid like mom wanted?” There was a rare note of approbation in his voice. “It’s looking good in here.”

“My friend dusted and turned on the roomba last night," Shen Yuan lied. “He stayed up last night to make sure I didn’t choke in my sleep so keep your voice down. He’s napping right now.”

“Since when do you have friends who know how to clean?” Jiu-ge wanted to know. He let himself into the fridge and made another reluctantly impressed noise as he reviewed the spotless interior of the fridge. “Or take care of sick people?” He put a hand on Shen Yuan’s shoulder. “You can be honest. Did she order the groceries for you?”

“S-she?!” Shen Yuan squawked. *“Ge!”*

“There’s *nothing* in those bags you can eat, didi," he chuckled. “I’ll give your girlfriend points for trying though. Quit trying to be tough and just tell her what you can’t have.”

Shen Yuan had ordered a bunch of dried goods based on stuff he remembered Binghe liking to keep around the kitchen for when they’d been away from home for a while; dried shrimp, oysters, ginger, and mushrooms. There were some air-cured meats in there too. None of it was anything he could handle before Binghe and his magical eating disorder bypass skills showed up in his life, but he trusted Binghe to make it palatable.

“I don’t have a girlfriend!” he insisted.

“Sorry, I meant your ‘friend.’” Jiu-ge corrected himself, not even pretending to believe him. He sobered up a little and leaned in to examine Shen Yuan’s face. “Your color’s not bad, but you still look like shit. Qi-ge is meal-prepping tonight. He says he’ll make you some stuff to put in the freezer.”

“You’re such a control freak!” Shen Yuan grumbled and started cramming stuff into the pantry. The only thing keeping him from tearing up was his low-level panic that Jiu-ge would sneak a look into the bedroom. As far as Shen Jiu was concerned, boundaries were something that happened to other people. Even so, it was just now hitting home how bad he’d missed this. “I can’t believe you skipped work. How long were you out there?”

“Not long.” Jiu-ge leaned against the counter. “I can do most of my job from a phone these days.”

“Stalker," Shen Yuan sighed.

“Get in trouble less often and maybe I’ll calm down.”

Binghe stood very quietly in the corridor outside the kitchen enveloped in demonic qi that camouflaged him from view. It wasn’t a technique he bothered with often. Hardly any demons did.

Most of them thought of ‘Shadow Cloak’ as a garbage technique and with good cause. Any sufficiently powerful cultivator could see them as a mass of shifting shadows. So the technique was only really useful if you were *absolutely certain* that no one nearby would be looking for demons. It was the same skill used by the Skinner demon he’d encountered as a child.

Binghe remembered it, though, as he started to obey his Shizun’s command. There weren’t cultivators in this world, he’d said. ‘Shadow Cloak’ would be more useful here and there was a good chance that listening to Shen Yuan and his brother talk might unlock more of the wiki. He had one guest pass already, but the fact that the System was even offering two of them had raised his suspicion. If there was more than one then there was a good chance that he was going to need them; therefore, he was going to do whatever he needed in order to *get* them.

That said, it was a good thing for Binghe that he was encountering Shen Jiu for the first time in a situation where he didn’t have to control his expression because the man in the kitchen teasing Binghe’s husband was Shen Qingqiu’s twin brother --if Shizun’s brother had led a very hard life, anyway.

The resemblance might not be readily apparent to anyone who was familiar with Shen Yuan wearing that face, but Binghe knew the habitual crease between those narrow brows, the brackets around that thin mouth, and the cool sparkle of his eyes that looked like sunlight on a distant black ice glacier. His face was a bit fuller in this world and he had two scars that cut through the corner of his mouth and one of his brows. He wore his hair shorter than Shen Yuan, but long enough to slick straight back and reveal the sharp widow’s peak of his hairline. There were the beginnings of lines just under his eyes from an aging process that would never touch the Immortal Xiu Ya sword of Binghe’s world.

Had Shizun *realized* that he’d been transmigrated into his own brother’s body?

Binghe could answer his own question without having to think about it. *No,* no he wouldn’t have. Shizun could be stubbornly ignorant of things that he knew would only hurt him. It was a very attractive quality, along with his stubborn refusal to ever stay dead.

Still, the fact that the real Shen Jiu existed in this world made Binghe wonder. Had there been a Shen Yuan in their world too?

No.

There couldn’t have been.

If there ever *had* been, then that child had likely died young. The Shen Jiu that became Shen Qingqiu started as a slave from uncertain origins, according to Qiu Haitang --although Binghe now doubted just how well the original owner of his Shizun’s body had been treated in that household. She *said* he’d been freed, treated kindly, and educated before being made into her fiance. The more he’d learned about Shen Jiu’s past the more delusional Qiu Haitang sounded.

Shizun didn’t have scars, but there were places on his body (his back, sides, the crooks of his arms, the backs of his calves) that felt like there *used* to be marks there; a subtle rubble underneath the skin that suggested the presence of old damage concealed by the kind of cosmetic repair you could only get access to as a master cultivator who was shamelessly abetted by his sect leader.

Child slaves were usually the spare children of farmers and they sold the youngest ones ahead of the ones who were old enough to work. If the original Shen Jiu had younger siblings during a

famine year then he likely hadn't been the first one to go to the servant broker, especially if he had a younger brother who required special care.

'Shizun can never know.' Binghe realized, scrubbing at his face. He wished *he* didn't know. He didn't want another Shen Yuan, but he felt cheated by the idea that his home world might have produced one and then taken him away. If it hadn't been for the interference of the System then he might never have had his Shen Yuan at all and who would he have become?

Trick question.

Binghe knew *exactly* who he would have become. He'd met the man and they'd tried to kill each other before the rabid lust-driven beast snuck into Binghe's house and tried to molest Binghe's husband. During his brief time in that other world, he'd witnessed with horror the gallery of women that other Luo Binghe had assembled and then mostly ignored in favor of his latest acquisitions. None of them were treated badly, but Binghe couldn't say they were cared for the way he believed a spouse deserved to be treated either. How could you possibly with so many?

"Since when do you have friends who know how to clean?" the not-Shizun asked. "Or take care of sick people?" He put a hand on Shizun's shoulder and Binghe sat on the unreasonable urge to go remove it at the man's shoulder. Brothers could touch each other and even *he* knew that was an acceptably affectionate level of touch. "You can be honest. Did she order the groceries for you?"

"S-she?!" Shizun made a noise like a startled chicken. *"Ge!"*

"There's *nothing* in those bags you can eat, didi," Shen Jiu had a condescending laugh that made Binghe want to grind his teeth. He thought he'd been making up just how obnoxious he'd found Shen Qingqiu back when they'd first met, before the qi deviation, before Shen Yuan was shoved into his skin. In fact his memories seemed to have *muted* it a little. "I'll give your girlfriend points for trying though. Quit trying to be tough and just tell her what you can't have."

Wait...what had he just said?

Binghe crept a little closer and watched his husband unpack things from thin white bags that he ate *all the time* with every evidence of pleasure and no repercussions that Binghe had ever observed. Since *when* could his husband not eat oysters? Maybe he wouldn't accept them from the kitchen staff on Qing Jing Peak, but no sane person would and, yes, Shizun wouldn't accept anything the Qing Jing kitchens produced that had shellfish in it either, dried or otherwise, or mushrooms… or dried meat... or nuts... or dried fruit...

Doubt crept into Binghe's heart.

Did Shizun like those things? Or had he been humoring Binghe all this time?

Despite what other people might think, Binghe *was* aware that Shizun had spoiled him with affection when he was young. It was a little embarrassing in retrospect, but he could never hate it. Binghe was a decent cook for his age back then, but no one had perfect success *all* the time. There were lots of times that Shizun ate things he'd burned or accidentally overseasoned without showing Binghe anything except glowing approval.

Shizun wouldn't eat for just anybody. That was undeniable. Ming Fan complained about it *all the time* when Binghe had been away on business. He rubbed at his sternum, trying to chase away the sense of uncertainty that had washed over him.

“I don’t have a girlfriend!” Shizun’s voice cracked on the word ‘girl.’ He really was more of an open book in this body and it was starting to grow on Binghe.

The conversation in the kitchen was still going. What was a girlfriend anyway? Binghe was very familiar with that flavor of his Shizun’s reactionary panic. It happened when any form of intimacy came up in conversation. He rarely acted that way with Binghe anymore. It was one of the things he liked best about not being newlyweds anymore.

Did Shen Jiu think Shizun had a lover? Possibly. Although, if Shen Jiu was expecting his little brother to specifically produce a *wife* then he was probably in for a shock.

“Sorry, I meant your ‘friend.’” Shen Jiu corrected himself snottily.

Binghe kept lurking, but didn’t glean anything else useful from the talk until Shizun managed to eject his sibling from the premises and came directly over to where Binghe’d been hiding to plant his face right in Binghe’s hidden chest.

It seemed as though he wasn’t going to get in trouble for eavesdropping so Binghe dropped the shadow cloak. He’d look into why his Shizun, who *claimed* he had no spiritual awareness in this body, had been able to locate him without any visible effort later.

“I missed him, but at the same time I *didn’t* miss him," he groaned and wrapped his arms around Binghe’s waist, which did quite a lot to soothe Binghe’s own nerves. They said that people who eavesdrop never heard anything good. He probably should have kept that truism in mind.

“What did he mean?” Binghe bit his tongue too late. Shizun squinted up at him.

“Is this about the girlfriend thing?” he asked. “Because he and Qi-ge are always like that. It’s just the noise they make at this point. Neither of them want to get married so they act like it’s my job to bring a daughter-in-law home to my parents.”

“About Shizun not being able to eat the things we sent for this morning," Binghe clarified although he did have some questions about that too. They were just less pressing. His brothers-in-law didn’t yet know it, but they’d get what they got and would have to learn to be happy with it.

Shizun turned so red that he could have convincingly passed as a tomato. “I-it’s nothing!” He ducked his face, which told Binghe it was something. “It doesn’t matter so long as Binghe’s the one cooking it.”

Without thinking, Binghe put his hands underneath his Shizun’s arms and lifted him up so they were eye-to-eye. He would have *never* done that before. Shizun’s other body was too tall, but the knowledge that he *could* do it if Shizun was like *this* had been lingering in the back of his mind ever since the first time Binghe’s husband parked himself in his lap; knowledge became thought, thought became action, and action led them to this moment where he’d just picked up his spouse like a misbehaving cat.

Binghe’s ears felt like they’d caught fire, but when in doubt he always tried to brazen it out. “This disciple suspects his master is evading the question," he grumbled.

He might as well have not said anything for all his husband seemed to be listening.

Shizun hung, boneless and trusting, from his hands with his lips parted and his eyes wide and --oh. *Oh.* Binghe knew *that* look.

His husband wet his lips and put his hands on Binghe's shoulders. "Back me up against the wall?" He asked breathlessly.

Like any good disciple, Binghe never disobeyed a direct order and was rewarded for his obedience when Shizun wrapped his legs around Binghe's waist and slid those lovely arms around his neck to pull him into a lingering kiss.

This was, technically, still avoiding the question; just in a manner Binghe was willing to accept.

So of course *that* was when the front door opened and Shen Jiu let himself back inside.

"Didi, sorry, I forgot my pho…" He stopped dead in his tracks, eyes wide as he took in the scene before him.

Shizun, who was brilliant at any other moment *except* when he wanted and was about to *get* sex, blinked and said, "It's on the counter."

Shen Yuan could have slapped himself.

Jiu-ge turned a shade of purple that shouldn't even have been possible. "No *girl* friend," he breathed and Shen Yuan imagined his brother's breath turning into smoke. He was honestly surprised it wasn't coming out as steam.

Fortunately for him, the jolt of adrenaline cleared the fog of hormones that had flooded his brain when Binghe had just *picked him up.* Without effort. And held up him up in the air. And used *that* growly tone with him.

He needed to get ahead of this before Jiu-ge said something none of them would be able to come back from.

"Nope!" He pointed at the door. *"Go home!"*

It worked. Jiu-ge focused on him with a tilt to his head that made him look like a velociraptor. "A-Yuan!"

"I'm in the middle of a date you already crashed once!" Shen Yuan hissed right back. Luckily, he'd gotten used to brazening through his knee jerk humiliation at being caught in the middle of making out with his husband given how often it happened. At least he had clothes on this time. "Go away!"

That worked too. Jiu-ge was no better able to withstand frank discussions of dates or dating than Shen Yuan himself could, but Shen Yuan was willing to weaponize that if he had to.

Jiu-ge snatched his phone off the counter and ran out the door like his life depended on it, slamming it behind him.

Meanwhile, Binghe stood rooted in place staring into the middle distance and didn't move even when Shen Yuan sagged against his husband's chest.

They were fucked. His family would descend on the apartment like the plagues of Egypt now. He'd only introduced them to *one* person before and that experience had convinced him to never ever do it again unless he'd already proposed and they'd signed an ironclad prenup that prevented them from running screaming into the night.

Well, technically he'd done both those things with Binghe. You couldn't get a more bulletproof agreement of commitment than actually being married.

Not --not that his parents could ever find out about that if he wanted Binghe to be accepted into the family. Shen Yuan marrying a boy was something he was pretty sure they'd be fine with. The boy who convinced their son to elope with him was a different matter.

It occurred to him that Binghe was being awfully quiet.

Binghe could barely hear his husband's concerned voice over the sound of multiple alerts from the System.

[Congratulations! Achievement Unlocked: My Good Cabbage is Being Eaten by a Pig]

[User has been awarded 100 C-Points! Your total is now 250 C-Points.]

[User has been penalized -50 Reputation points with Shen Jiu due to witnessing your licentious behavior with his younger brother!]

[Shen Jiu's current attitude towards User: Enraged and Traumatized! He will surely tell his family about this.]

All Binghe's progress had just vanished in a puff of smoke. Any second now the other deductions would come pouring in. Shen Jiu had his 'phone' with him. Surely he was telling all Binghe's future in-laws what he had witnessed and that Binghe was no better than a brazen seducer.

That was *not* the first impression he'd wanted to make.

He sank down into a crouch and wrapped his arms around Shizun's back. They'd hate him now. Why did this *always* happen? Why was Binghe always the biggest obstacle when it came to his own happiness?

A ringing sound started up between his ears and the world receded for a while.

Slowly, he became aware of hands in his hair and his husband's low tuneless humming.

Shizun was still stroking his hair when Binghe threw off the last lingering wisps of his panic-induced fugue state. He let himself enjoy the sensation for a little while until Shizun noticed that he'd surfaced.

"Feeling better?" Shizun asked when Binghe was able to focus on his face.

"That was bad," Binghe rasped. "He's going to tell everyone and they'll hate me."

Shizun smiled and said, "Nah."

"What do you mean *'nah'?"* Binghe asked, a little affronted.

“I meant ‘nah.’” Shizun repeated himself and held up his own ‘phone.’ “I took care of it. Everyone in my family is familiar enough with Jiu-ge’s triggers that they’re going to wait to make up their own minds about you. The only thing that happened is that I had to tell them I like boys.”

He turned on the machine to show Binghe a conversation.

Meimei: FYI Jiu-ge is having a spectacular meltdown on the groupchat RN

Meimei: Just in case you have it muted again

Meimei: if you do I don’t blame you

SY: I saw. I’m just not taking questions at this time. (￣へ￣)

Meimei: Yeah, way to get dragged out of the closet (・_・)ノ”(￣へ￣)

Meimei: So dudes. You’re into them. Would not have guessed that, but my gaydar is broke so

SY: One specific dude.

Meimei: Sounds serious.

Meimei: Is he hot?

SY: Like the sun. (￣ω￣)

SY: Also ripped and VERY tall. So

Meimei: Seeing the problem. Okay, I’ll run interference for you.

Meimei: You owe me my bodyweight in boba and I will collect

SY: understood.

Binghe understood maybe three sentences in the entire exchange, but they seemed to be the crucial ones. Mingyu, at least, did not hate him and seemed willing to help them out. Just like that, the room brightened a little bit.

He sniffed and rubbed one watering eye. “What is ‘boba’?” Whatever it was, Binghe would make sure she had it in any quantity she desired.

“It’s sweetened tea with milk and tapioca pearls in it," Shizun explained as he pocketed his phone again. “I’ll get you some when we’re out later. You’ll like it. They make it in fruit flavors.”

“Mm," he turned his face into his husband’s shoulder. He still felt awful, but better than before. “Do we *need* to go anywhere? Can we stay here a bit longer?”

“Whatever Binghe likes,” Shizun said. Unfortunately, he had That Tone, the one Binghe hated most because it meant his husband foresaw problems with granting Binghe’s request, but was going to do it anyway.

He glanced at his husband’s pensive expression. “What?”

Shizun winced. “My family will probably start inviting themselves over soon," he confessed. “We should get you some different clothes first. The stuff I ordered is a little casual.” He wet his lips. “This might be Binghe’s only chance to meet them.”

Implied in that statement was an insinuation that Binghe was already *far* too aware of. He'd fumbled one first impression just now. Possibly there was no way for him to have ever hit it off with Shen Jiu (going by the conversation between Shizun and Meimei, there seemed to be something intrinsic about him that would have triggered Jiu-ge anyway no matter what Binghe did) but the only way that could have gone worse was if they’d been actively fucking when Shen Jiu walked in instead of just about to start.

Binghe took a breath, mustered up some courage, and nodded. “Then I should get changed," he said. Then he paused, drawn up short as he caught up with the other thing his spouse had said. ‘This might be Binghe’s only chance to meet them.’

He was being foolish and had overlooked an obvious resource while he was at it.

“Shizun,” he asked as he turned around. “Do you know what a ‘visa’ is?”

Shizun blinked. “It’s a travel document,” he explained. “It’s something you get to show you have permission to enter or live in a country where you don’t have citizenship. Why do you…” he cut himself off and shook his head. “...you can’t tell me, can you?”

Binghe glanced at the glowing square that had started to manifest in the corner of his vision, but had already started to fade away.

“No, I’m afraid not. Forgive me.” Binghe said and thought about what he’d just learned. He waited until he was alone in the bedroom to address the System. “System, do I already have a ‘visa’?”

The panel appeared with a pop.

[Opening User Inventory. User is currently in possession of Zhang Yang sword, Xin Mo sword, one (1) Limited Visa, and one (1) Guest Pass. Note: Guest Passes cannot be used with a Limited Visa.]

So the visas and the passes were what allowed him to travel between worlds. They must represent the ‘authorization’ he’d needed to leave his home world. This was starting to make sense. There were two ‘permanent’ visas he could obtain, which would theoretically make it possible for both of them to travel between worlds at will. Those guest passes, then, could be used to bring other people with them.

Binghe’s hands curled into fists. This wasn’t just about bringing his husband home anymore.

This had to be part of the game. Getting the minimum requirements to win wasn’t all that difficult. The System had added a layer of complication that Binghe couldn’t ignore. It was using Shizun’s family and lost life as *bait.* Binghe would have bet an entire palace that the System was banking on Binghe choosing to try for the full reward. That would give it more time and opportunities to reduce Binghe’s point balance and swipe his win -and his husband- out from under him.

‘We’ll see about that,’ Binghe thought grimly to himself. ‘We’ll just see.’

Chapter End Notes

“Stalker," Shen Yuan sighed.

“Get in trouble less often and maybe I’ll calm down.”

Comment from my beta: 'Seems unlikely.'

Meanwhile, Bingyuan are discovering some unanticipated mutual kinks.

Fun fact, Mingyu is in fact ALSO gay so when she says she has no Gaydar, it's an actual problem.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Binghe put up with the sweats like a champ and, true to type, turned out to be one of those people who could make a gray and black tracksuit look like high fashion. Shen Yuan, in his best outfit, looked like a high school kid on an outing with his cool older brother.

Still, he was excited as he let them out of the apartment and took them down the elevator onto the street level.

He lived in a pretty affluent neighborhood, but luck wasn't with them that day. Shen Yuan could tell as soon as they hit the lobby that it wasn't a good AQI day and Binghe made a strangled *'hrk!'* noise the second they hit the street. An old lady gave them a weird look as he wrestled his husband out of the flow of foot traffic.

"Lean over, breathe through your mouth," he advised and gave the elderly woman an apologetic look. "Sorry, it's his first bad AQI day here."

The woman gave Binghe a once-over and, noting his heroic proportions, nodded sympathetically. "Maybe a face mask will help? Poor dear."

Shen Yuan pulled one out of his pocket. He hadn't wanted to start his husband off in the mask. For one thing he already looked like a celebrity on his day off. "Already prepared. Here you go, Binghe. Pull the loops over your ears…"

She tittered at them and wandered off.

"Shizun, what…" Binghe asked, looking miserable even through his black cotton mask. "...what *is* that stench?"

It didn't smell too bad to Shen Yuan, but Binghe had only breathed the pure air of a pre-industrial Xianxia-fantasy world. Well, admittedly, the Demon realm didn't smell too hot either, but that was more like a mineral smell; something more akin to a pungent hot spring. This was a different dense-post-industrial-society-urban-population beast.

"The air around here isn't good," Shen Yuan explained. "The locals are used to it. You'll stop noticing in a few days."

That was right about when he lost control of the outing.

Binghe, understandably wanted explanations about *everything* he saw; cars, streetlights, what the roads were made of, the purpose of individual styles of architecture, school uniforms, you name it. It was one of those moments where Shen Yuan was reminded that his husband was frighteningly intelligent because he soaked up new information like a sponge and never forgot it. His questions quickly outstripped Shen Yuan's ability to answer them, but he could get away with saying 'we can look it up when we get home' for a lot of it.

They were fine in the first store, where he managed to find some shirts that wouldn't burst at the shoulders the first time his husband tensed up. They had some luck in the second store, which carried decent shoes in Binghe's size. It was there that *he* noticed *Binghe* noticing the people around them and carefully observing the advertisements they passed. He didn't comment so Shen Yuan didn't ask, but he came to regret that in the third store.

Nothing they'd bought so far had a luxury brand name. Shen Yuan had wanted to get Binghe's basics out of the way first. His husband wouldn't know a designer brand from any other piece of clothing, but Shen Yuan's parents (and more crucially his overprotective brothers) did. Even *more* importantly, *Shen Yuan* knew and he wanted the chance to be the one to spoil his husband for once.

Binghe was an impossible person to give presents to. There was hardly anything in the other world that he needed and didn't already have the best of or -even worse- receive in glorious excess as annual tributes from his domains. He never said what he wanted or if he did it was 'Shizun, play me that song', 'Shizun, comb my hair', or 'Shizun, I found these erotic restraints in a succubus lair.'

All of those were things Shen Yuan gladly did already so special occasions like anniversaries were *very* stressful.

His plan was that they were going to Dongliang to try and find a few nice pieces to incorporate into the capsule collection Shen Yuan was painstakingly trying to build for his husband, but in doing so he forgot one *very* important thing.

To give the two-faced stinker he married all due credit, Binghe kept a low profile while Shen Yuan shopped on his behalf; observing, learning, and biding his time. It wasn't until they were headed to the dressing room that he realized that Binghe had at some point *also* accumulated a large selection of clothing draped over his arm.

Shen Yuan blinked down at the pale linen shirts and a pair of crepe slacks. "Does Binghe want to try something new?" He asked. Those were all very pale colors that Binghe hadn't worn since he was a teenager, although not for lack of opportunities. Did he want to experiment now that they were some place where changing his colors didn't have massive political ramifications? The Demon Realm didn't often give a shit about who wore what or -more often- anything at all, but Cultivation Society was *always* looking for an excuse to start petty drama.

Binghe all but sparkled at him. "I would like to see Shizun try these on."

Oh *no.*

"Binghe, we are shopping for *you," Shen* Yuan started backing up. He didn't get far. A display blocked his path backwards. "I have plenty of clothes!"

His husband picked up a shirt from the stack he was carrying and held it up to Shen Yuan's torso without giving any sign that he'd heard. It was a thin, long-sleeved dress shirt with subtle textured satin polka dots on it and an open standing collar. He'd seen something like it on a billboard outside on a model who was almost as attractive as Shen Qingqiu and had been wearing it half unbuttoned over a thin gray tee with skinny jeans that had the knees torn out.

"I seem to recall Shizun making a certain promise…" Binghe's smile offered him no possibility of mercy. "...that you would wear *anything* so long as you never had to think about clothing again. Does Shizun perhaps recall this conversation as well? I can quote it from memory if needed."

Shen Yuan's face felt like the surface of the sun, but he forced himself to nod.

As much as he'd come to appreciate tailored clothing, he *loathed* actual tailors and the feeling was mutual. Buying clothes back home was an affair that could take weeks at a time. One had to be measured every single time and select entire outfits out of a sea of fashion books. That was not the end of it, either. Then one had to go through fabric warehouses to pick out the cloth. It still didn't end there. There was embroidery and jewelry to consider and if you were a cultivator then some things had to be ordered specially from the weavers in order to have spell arrays built into the fabric.

It was a nightmare that occured twice a year, sometimes more if a special event came up.

Shen Yuan usually lost his patience by the second day of it all and by the time Binghe was sixteen the tailors and seamstresses that worked with Cang Qiong Mountain sect didn't even bother speaking to Shen Yuan anymore. They addressed their questions directly to his loyal attendant disciple, Luo Binghe, who took to the process like a duck to water.

Binghe *loved* buying new clothes with the kind of fervor that was maybe understandable in someone who had at one time considered a single mud colored hand-me-down tunic every other year to be the height of good luck. Now that he was an adult, even his plainest outfits were exquisitely put together with carefully thought-out themes in their ornamentation.

The only thing Binghe seemed to like better was dressing up his husband like a doll. The fashions of Proud Immortal Demon Way were still ridiculous to Shen Yuan's modern sensibilities even after they'd gotten married and emerged from the extended vacation they'd taken from their mutual responsibilities in lieu of a wedding, but that didn't mean he'd been able to escape the need for a wardrobe equal to his status of Lord Luo Binghe's Prince Consort.

That was when he'd made his fatal declaration, surrounded by more fashion plates than he'd known existed, several annoyed seamstresses who were only there to do a job, and unfortunately *right* where his lurking husband could overhear it. Shen Yuan hadn't even been loud about it. He'd just muttered it under his breath, only for Binghe to somehow *materialize* at his elbow.

"Let your husband take care of those petty details," Binghe'd cooed at him with a sparkle in his eyes that said he was absolutely getting off on it and -if Shen Yuan ever changed his mind- the privilege would have to be reclaimed from his cold dead hands.

At the time, Shen Yuan had thought escaping that room and all the fashion books was worth putting on whatever ornate monstrosity he ended up in. Now he was paying for it.

"One outfit," he said pointing a finger up at his husband's amused face. *"One."*

Binghe smiled and agreed and by the time it was all over he'd talked Shen Yuan into *three* new outfits plus matching accessories. The only reason Shen Yuan left the building feeling like he'd won was because he knew that if Binghe had gotten his way it would have been *five.*

The things he did for love…

Binghe enjoyed himself thoroughly in the garment shops after he'd adjusted to being surrounded by strange towering buildings made almost entirely of glass and this new world's social conventions of commerce, but their last errand after dropping off their purchases was where he seriously

considered just never going home. The Demon Realm had survived twenty-five years of his father's neglect. Surely they'd manage in Binghe's absence.

"Breathe, Binghe," Shizun murmured as he handed over a black handbasket. "It's just a grocery store."

How could Binghe *breathe?* It was like the seasons didn't even exist here! It felt like late autumn outside, but there was summer produce on the shelves! Those were just the things he was able to *identify.* The shelves of the 'produce section' hung heavy with fruits and vegetables he'd never even seen before.

"Let's look at the meat counter first," Shizun suggested and dragged Binghe away by the hand before he could become overwhelmed by an overabundance of choice.

It was a good decision. Butchers didn't change much. The only thing different there compared to Binghe's experience was that the meat was already on display in a glass case lined with ice. He was vaguely annoyed by not being allowed to smell the meat, but the color was fine and Shizun explained to him that there was a lot more legislation in this world concerning the distribution of food, not to mention the conditions it could be kept in prior to sale, so there was less need to be suspicious of vendors here. The drawback was that you also couldn't haggle. The price listed was firm.

They ended up leaving the grocer's with more than Shizun had wanted to buy, but less than Binghe had aimed for. It had been over a day since either of them had had a decent meal and he was looking forward to changing that.

Returning to the house was its own adventure. Leaving their building that morning -not to mention encountering the pervasive odor of Beijing- had been too overwhelming for him to realize just how large it was at first. Their courtyard was open to the sky as well, which he suspected was a greater indication of wealth than all that glass. Living space must come at a premium in this world if *everyone* lived stacked on top of one another.

The seasons *did* exist here, as he was pleased to learn on the walk back while Shizun answered his barrage of questions, but were supplemented by a global trade network that Bringhe frankly had trouble picturing. However it meant he could serve his husband scallion oil noodles with poached chicken and spicy smashed cucumbers even though they were well into Bailu and nearing the Autumnal Equinox.

Nothing could prevent their interrupted conversation from seeping back into the forefront of Binghe's mind though, even as his husband cheerfully watched him pull noodles for their dinner.

Shizun was a lousy liar. His eyes gave him away every time. Even when they'd been at their most divided, all Binghe had to do was look his former teacher in the eye to know *something* was killing him inside even though he seemed willing to die rather than say *what* no matter how many opportunities Binghe arranged for him. In this original body of his even his complexion conspired against him. He'd turn every shade of pink imaginable, but at that moment Binghe's husband was just watching him cook with every evidence of anticipation.

Shen Jiu hadn't seemed to be lying. So what did he know that Binghe didn't?

Shizun said he'd died from eating something bad and implied it had been complications of food poisoning that killed him, but that seemed impossible for someone with as choosy a palate as Shen

Yuan's. Binghe's cooking aside, if there was something even slightly off about a dish's taste or texture then Shizun refused it without hesitation. From what his brother implied, that wasn't new behavior.

The ping from Shizun's phone interrupted his chain of thought and the look on his husband's face when he read the screen was enough to divert his attention permanently.

"Do you think we have enough to feed three?" Shizun gulped and showed Binghe his screen.

Mom: Your father is working late tonight. I'll be coming over for dinner. We can order in.

Mom: Have your young man ready if Jiu-er hasn't already scared him off.

Binghe swallowed hard on a lump in his throat and then nodded.

Shizun carefully typed in his response.

SY: He's still here. He'd like to meet you too. No need to order. He made dinner already. There's enough for three.

To say they both panicked was putting it mildly. Shizun ran around tidying the room and hiding things that he evidently did not want his mother looking at, which was how Binghe discovered that the glass wall of their bedroom turned semi-opaque if you tapped it in a certain way. Meanwhile Binghe stir-fried some garlic and *dou miao* to stretch out the dinner portions.

The security buzzer rang all too soon. Binghe had only just barely changed into new clothes and hadn't even combed his hair. He wasn't *ready.*

He might *never* be ready.

Shizun had been quicker to change. To Binghe's great pleasure, he was wearing one of the ensembles that Binghe had picked out for him; slim denim trousers with artistic slashes across the thighs, that white shirt with the shiny patches on it that played interestingly in the light, and an oversized heavy knit sweater in the color of new spring leaves that both emphasized the delicacy of his frame and gave him something to burrow into, much to Binghe's own great delight. He'd never seen Shizun do that before since the wardrobe he'd adopted as Shen Qingqiu didn't lend itself to anything like *cuddliness.*

Once they made it home Binghe was going to commission some *very* different winter wear this year.

It hadn't escaped his notice that Shizun had been fretting over his old wardrobe, which seemed understandable when he thought about it. Binghe had made a careful study of his husband's sartorial preferences and the clothes he'd left behind in this first life did not match Binghe's observations even a little bit. It had been over a decade after all. His tastes would hardly be the same as they'd been when he was a younger man.

Binghe lurked down the corridor, shamelessly eavesdropping as Shizun let his mother in.

Binghe's first impression was that Madame Bai and her husband must have been very, *very* young when they'd brought in all their sons. She had an easy ageless air to her that wouldn't have looked out of place back home in cultivation society. Her clothes might have given them pause though. She

wore a loose, pale blouse tucked into a narrow high-waisted skirt that extended just barely below her knees and split in the back.

It was maybe a good thing that Binghe had spent a large part of his day educating himself about what modesty looked like in this world, otherwise he might have had a shock, seeing his mother-in-law's bare legs.

Like many of the women Binghe'd observed that afternoon, Madame Bai wore a pair of high-heeled shoes, plain and severe black ones with no decorations on them except their bright red soles. Unlike those other women though, Madame Bai's shoes *clicked* against the tiled entrance.

Her hair was long and black. She wore it loose down her back like a maiden, but he was pretty sure something had been done to it. Hair didn't form neat and tidy waves like that without some form of intervention.

It was in her expression that Binghe found the greatest resemblance between mother and son. Shizun as Shen Yuan was soft and emotive, but Madame Bai wore her face the way Shizun wore Shen Qingqiu's.

She made a small, but subtly pleased sound when her son wrapped her up in a tight hug the second the door was closed and returned it with a small, graceful pat between his shoulders. Yes, this was *definitely* the person Shizun had chosen to emulate after being dumped into a new body and a new life without ceremony or warning and forced to act in the role of a Peak Lord.

[Notice: Understanding of Shen Yuan is now at 60%! Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

He waved the notice away, too intent on the scene unfolding before him.

"Goodness, you're this old and still clinging to your mother," she chided and Binghe's heart clenched. "What will your young man think, ah?"

"My young man has no room to point fingers," Shizun replied with a smile that he turned in Binghe's direction. He came over, slid a reassuring hand into the small of Binghe's back as he coaxed him forward. "Mom, this is my boyfriend, Luo Binghe."

Madame Bai's expression cooled down to something like neutrality as she looked him over, starting at the top of his head, pausing at his feet, and then rising to meet his eyes once more.

Binghe bowed with sincerity. Too late he realized he had no idea what a normal greeting looked like in this society. "Madame Bai, I'm pleased to meet you."

She cocked her head thoughtfully and flicked an errant stand of hair back over her shoulder with an elegant gesture that displayed the sharp tips of her red lacquered nails.

The clicking was *deliberate,* Binghe realized, as she walked up to him still not giving away any clue as to how she felt about this new development in her son's life. If she'd been a cultivator, he was certain she'd be oppressing him with her Qi right now. Somehow the sound of her shoes and the sheer force of her personality was doing the same thing.

Binghe reminded himself he was a Great Lord of Demons and a force to be reckoned with in the Human Realm as well. This was one small mortal woman. She couldn't hurt him if she tried and, if

all else failed, he could hide behind his husband who'd promised before Heaven, Earth, and their Ancestors to honor, love, and protect him --particularly from intimidating women.

"A-Yuan," her cool black gaze slid towards Shizun and a small smile like the first gasp of Spring cracked her glacial expression at last. "This is *the most precious individual I have ever encountered.* Where did you find him?"

Shizun chuckled and bumped his shoulder up against Binghe's. "He found me."

There had never been a doubt in Shen Yuan's mind that his mother would adore Binghe on sight.

He'd overhead a conversation between her and Mingyu once when Mingyu was just starting to look like she might be turning a corner in terms of 'boys are icky, throw rocks at them' in her social development.

"When you're looking for someone to have in your life, things like their job and family are important, but when you get right down to it..." their mother had said, "... they just have to be cute. A determined woman can get everything else they want in this world, but a cute man is rare enough that it's worthwhile to make allowances for one."

Anyone who'd met the man she married knew that she'd put her money where her mouth was.

Binghe all but *glowed* as she tutted over him, fixing the drape of his shirt, and brushing the hair out of his face. If he wasn't cute then the classification needed to be abolished and the fact that Binghe let her fuss over him like that was winning him brownie points he didn't even know about. Shen Yuan had come by his petting habit honestly after all.

"Dinner's waiting," he reminded them because letting Binghe's cooking get cold was sacrilege as far as he was concerned. "Can I loan you a shirt, mom? Binghe made *Cong You Ban Mian* and that looks like silk."

"Did he?" She glanced at him, gaze lingering on his outfit. "You're looking very nice as well. Are you sure *Yuan-er* doesn't need to change?" She mused with a knowing look. The last time she'd seen him he wore his pants a size too large on purpose and hid the rest of his body under bulky hoodies so he could ignore the fact that he had a mortal frame. Whatever she was thinking was probably less embarrassing than 'my husband doesn't let me dress myself anymore' so he let her keep thinking it.

"Everything I wear is machine washable," he chuckled and anyway Binghe had actual *spells* he used to clean their delicates. A little bit of oil was no challenge when you considered the amount of monster ichor and 'please don't worry, Shizun, it's not *my* blood' Shen Yuan's husband had to deal with on a regular basis.

"This old lady will be fine so long as someone feeds me soon," his mother reassured him and sniffed appreciatively as he showed her to the table, where the dishes (plus the extras Binghe had thrown together at the last second) were already arranged and ready to serve. Being a mom, she immediately looked for the 'Yuan-safe' plate that had occupied every communal dinner table he'd sat at right up until the day he'd died and, finding none, shot him a concerned look that (damn it) Binghe did *not* miss.

“It’ll be fine," he said to the room at large and pulled out a chair for her while Binghe went to set out tea. Luckily they’d bought new, good tea while they were out. Shen Yuan of the past had mainly stuck to water or soda and thus didn’t have anything in the house worth serving.

Way too many people were watching him as he served first his mother, then his husband, and finally himself. Unlike Jiu-ge, his mother didn’t call him out on the previously forbidden things going into his bowl. Decades of living as Shen Qingqiu were the only thing that kept his face from falling apart as he pretended to ignore the way everyone including the elder at their table was waiting to see him take a bite.

His mother’s poker face was even better than his. A slight lift of her brow was the only reaction he got when he dug into his hand-pulled noodles. Binghe didn’t make them often because he hated using the dried stuff so Shen Yuan didn’t plan on missing out.

She blinked at him and finally started paying attention to her own bowl. A startled flush spread across her cheeks as the flavor hit her palate and Shen Yuan grinned at her as she covered her mouth with one hand with her eyes wide. “Yuan-er!”

Binghe looked back and forth between them. “Is something wrong?” He did not look mollified when they both shook their heads at him. Shen Yuan patted his thigh under the table to reassure him.

“He pulled the noodles by hand," he told his mother in a conspiratorial voice. Now she’d *surely* get *why* Binghe’s cooking was never going to be a problem. Every flavor was *perfectly* balanced; nothing was too sour, bitter, tart, or sweet. The noodles had the perfect amount of oil to keep them lubricated without becoming slimy. The garlic oil had been infused to the peak of fragrant perfection without getting the slightest bit bitter. The noodles themselves were neither rubbery nor mushy, with just exactly the right amount of bite.

Shen Yuan smiled as she tried a bite of the garlicky *dou miao* and discovered that Binghe had somehow, with just a few minutes of cooking, removed anything like bitterness from the pea tips. They weren’t stringy either thanks to the way he cut them; just fragrant and clean as they dissolved on the tongue.

“This is amazing?” She turned to Binghe. “Are you a professional? I’ve eaten at Michelin Starred restaurants where the food wasn’t this good.” That was an understatement. Bai Huiqing was a well known food critic among her social circle.

“No.” Binghe cleared his throat as he groped for their hasty cover story. “I’m… a student. I learned to cook from my mother.”

“Is she local?” his mother asked. “Perhaps we can all get together while you’re visiting?”

Shen Yuan caught her eye and shook his head.

Binghe’s gaze dipped. “She would have liked that, but I’m afraid she died when I was fairly young. It’s just me now.” A small smile flickered across his face as Shen Yuan squeezed his knee under the table in a silent reminder that it was *them* now.

Chapter End Notes

LBH vs Beijing Air Quality

LBH 0 : Beijing 1

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Image credit to by Ataratah!

https://archiveofourown.org/users/ataratah

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Congratulations! Achievement Unlocked: A Mom In Your Corner]

[User has been awarded 100 C-Points! Your total is now 350 C-Points.]

[User has gained 200 Reputation points with Bai Huiqing!]

[Bai Huiqing's current attitude towards User: Extremely Positive!]

Dinner went disturbingly well. Whatever reservations Madame Bai had about the food dissipated and she regularly topped off both their bowls over the course of the meal; something only his Shizun or Shijie had ever done for Binghe.

It made him feel warm all the way through to be fussed over and see his husband receive the same treatment. This was a kind of interaction that had been largely absent from his life except for those times when his husband was in his life. It was notably absent from Shen Yuan's too. Shizun's martial siblings cared for him, Binghe was certain, but they always seemed to *need* things; time, attention, or emotional investment. They were present for a crisis -he had five long years of evidence for that- but this quiet sort of domestic care was different.

Shizun took away the plates to wash them. Binghe hated it, but Madame Bai made it clear she expected him to entertain her in the living room and Binghe wasn't confident enough yet to use the dish washing machine in the kitchen so it was for the best.

"While he's occupied…" Madame Bai fished out her 'phone' with a small conspiratorial look. It was gold, unlike Shizun's black device. "...would you like to see some pictures?"

"Of course." Binghe had no idea what she meant by that, but he'd agree to just about anything she suggested. He wanted so badly to be likeable. Fortunately, she seemed predisposed to like him so it wasn't hard.

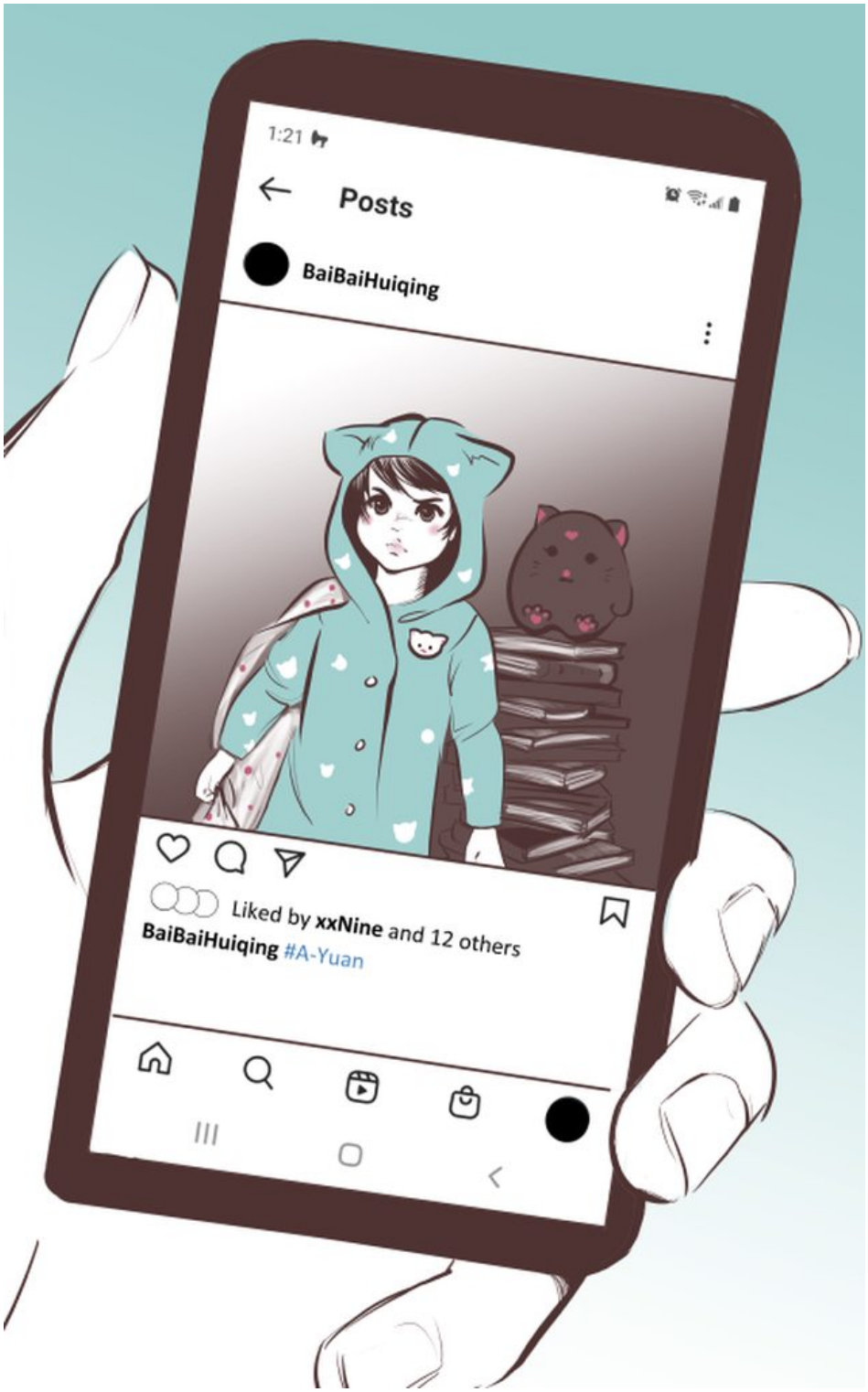
'Pictures' turned out to be different from the selfies he'd taken with Shizun during the day. These were older images and some of them featured…

Binghe held the phone in trembling hands. It was lightweight enough that he was worried he'd break it if he held it too tightly and the picture on it would be lost forever. That could *never* happen because he now knew what his most precious person *looked like as a baby.*

Shen Yuan was on the small and thin side as an infant, but obviously well cared for under Madame Bai's protection. If the pictures were anything to go by, she'd dressed him exclusively in little one-piece outfits with hoods that had *fake animal ears* sewn onto them.

Children weren't an option for them at present. Binghe's domains weren't settled enough to grant himself the luxurious burden of a second weak spot and Shizun had his own responsibilities to Qing Jing peak. It'd be a long while until the present generation retired to make way for the next Peak Lords, but after that… maybe they would need some cute animal costumes of their own. Binghe hadn't been able to picture it before and was thus only mildly interested in expanding their family despite his yearning for a crowded family home, but *now* --now Binghe wanted a tiny Shen Yuan to hold.

"He's so *cranky,"* Binghe whispered to the screen, unable to handle the distinctly unamused look the infant Shizun was directing towards his mother. He looked ready to take on the world in single combat and *win.*



“It took him a while to warm up to strangers," Madame Bai allowed and flicked the screen to produce another picture. This one featured Shen Jiu as well, looking about ten years old or perhaps even younger. There was a thick scabbed over cut in his eyebrow that showed signs of stitching, but his focus was on his infant brother holding onto his extended index finger with a more customary happy baby look on his small face. “This is from when we first brought them home. It was months before he’d settle for anyone except Jiu-er.”

Shen Jiu had a ruddy shadow along his jaw that Binghe knew from experience would bloom into a black bruise. Binghe’s attention drifted towards the too-thin baby in his new clean bassinet. There

was something he'd noticed, but hadn't quite placed until just now. He'd seen Madame Bai make the pictures larger by touching the screen and spreading his fingers. He tried it for himself and made the picture large enough for him to look at his infant husband's fragile little neck.

Pale lavender and yellow-green dots circled the baby's throat.

Binghe hadn't grown up in a prosperous town. Even the local nobility went hungry sometimes if the harvest was bad enough. During the very, very bad years small bodies would sometimes appear in out of the way places around the village. They sometimes had marks on their throats just like that, only darker. Their bruises never got the opportunity to heal.

"Ah. Forgive me. I'd forgotten it was visible in that picture. I hope that didn't upset you." Madame Bai took the phone back, but didn't banish the image. "Yuan-er and Jiu-er were placed in a bad home before we got them. Yuan-er doesn't remember them at all, but we think that this…" She caressed the picture with gentle fingers. "...is what caused some of his later problems with eating. It's a documented effect of --well, I'm sure you can tell. Usually it's because the child's umbilical cord got wrapped around their throat during birth."

Oh, *here* was a possibility he hadn't considered.

Shizun would talk to him eventually, but if it was something like *this* then it'd take a long time and they'd have to space it out over many, many conversations. For other people, Shizun was fearless. For himself, it was a different matter.

"A-Yuan hasn't been able to talk to me about his problems much." Binghe adjusted his expression more towards 'woebegone' in order to coax her into empathizing with him without examining his motivations too deeply. It didn't take much in the way of acting. That picture lingered in his mind's eye like a ghost, but he was angrier than he was sad. If that 'bad home' still existed in this world then it might not for much longer. "I know he has trouble eating, but not the specifics. He tries to explain, but…"

"No, I suppose it's a struggle. He hates it," she agreed sadly. "Yuan-er has had an eating disorder ever since he was little. Food with certain textures or smells make him gag and he can't swallow. He got *very* frustrated about it when he was younger because he couldn't eat the same things as his friends or classmates even when he wanted to. There were only a few things he could swallow without issue. It wasn't that he was unwilling. He *wanted* to be able to eat like everyone else, but it just wasn't a problem he could power through. We signed him up with an occupational therapist and that helped somewhat, but mostly resulted in new problems." She blanked the screen with an unhappy sigh. "That brings up something I wanted to discuss with you."

Binghe straightened, although his mind was spinning. Still, he forced himself to compartmentalize it.

"Jiu-er is much older than his brother," she explained. "He remembers more of what happened and none of it was good. My husband and I did our best to help him work through it and he's shed most of his dangerous coping behaviors, but my Jiu-er still carries his past with him. There are certain people he has trouble interacting with; namely men. I think the only men he's ever truly warmed up to are his brothers. He's still on the fence about my husband most days and he voluntarily calls that man his father."

Binghe had no idea what a 'dangerous coping behavior' was except for what it sounded like, but this seemed like something Shizun could clarify later.

“By that, I mean that you may need to be *very* tolerant in the future," Madame Bai continued. “It may not seem like it at first, but Jiu-er tries hard. It just takes time for someone who isn’t used to him to understand what his care looks like.”

“I understand.” Binghe had dealt with worse in order to have Shizun by his side. An obnoxious, but ultimately well-intentioned copy of the tyrant of his early youth was hardly worth his notice.

Madame Bai rewarded him with a cheek pat that he couldn’t help melting into. “Such a *lovely* young man.”

“Is it safe for me to come in yet?” Shizun called from the kitchen. “If I come over, will there be a naked toddler on anyone’s screen?”

“The coast is clear, darling.” Madame Bai glanced at her screen again when it vibrated. There was a message on it, but Binghe was at a bad angle to read it. She chuckled. “I’ll need to go soon. Your father is getting lonely.”

She let them keep her for a little while longer, but eventually the door closed behind his mother-in-law’s back and Shen Yuan sagged into his side.

“My life just flashed before my eyes!” He groaned.

“She was kind.” Binghe could hear the wonder in his own tone. He’d never *not* had to work for it.

Shizun smiled into his shoulder. “Well, I love you both..." he admitted quietly like they said it every day instead of hardly ever. “...and you both love me. When it’s like that then the hard part is already over.”

“Then what was your Er-ge’s reasoning?” Binghe looped his husband in for a tighter hug. He was reasonably sure he had all the pieces. He just wanted to make sure they fit together.

“Uh.” Shizun squirmed. “Mom told you about where we came from, right? I thought I overheard you talking about it.”

Binghe nodded gravely.

Shizun adjusted his glasses in a transparent excuse to avoid eye contact. Binghe let him have it. “Let’s just say that dealing with big, physically imposing guys is something he struggles with. Leaving me, *specifically,* alone with big, physically imposing men isn’t easy for him either.”

The System likely wasn’t assigning points to anyone but Binghe, but if it were then Shen Jiu would have gained a landslide of reputation points with Binghe in that moment.Even now, he could still picture a tiny neck wreathed in healing bruises with distressing accuracy. Keeping his promise with Madame Bai suddenly didn’t seem like such a hardship.

Maybe Shizun was onto something when it came to how easy it was to warm up to someone who loved the same person you did.

“It probably isn’t helping that you’re really attractive," Shizun added, which Binghe always liked to hear although in this case he didn’t quite follow. “Big, imposing, beautiful men are used to getting what they want, *whatever* they want," he clarified.

That was, unfortunately, something Binghe knew only too well. Every street child learned that lesson if they were going to survive long at all. The only thing that made it worse was if they were rich. Poor men could sometimes be brought to justice if they messed up badly enough. Even a weak, ugly man could become untouchable if he had enough money.

“I will endeavor to get along with your siblings," Binghe promised.

Even if Shen Jiu *was* an uncomfortable reminder of his original teacher, Binghe thought he’d be able to keep that promise purely on the strength of the way Shen Yuan smiled at him just for making it.

What followed ought to have been a fairly quiet evening. High emotions made them both a bit clingy for a while afterwards. ypically *Binghe* was the only one who didn’t bother making pretenses about it, but not that night.

Shizun was a bit like a cat -even in his original body- and usually pretended it was pure coincidence that he never got out of arm’s reach of his husband or that Binghe was taking up too much of the couch so Shizun was forced (forced!) to curl up in his lap. This time he arranged Binghe on the sofa to his satisfaction without so much as a blush and spooned his back up against Binghe’s chest to read things on his ‘tablet’; an odd thing that appeared to be a larger version of his ‘phone’ and seemed to contain entire libraries,’ worth of reading material.

Binghe was interested in it, but that evening he’d chosen to experiment with Shizun’s music collection instead. Recorded music existed in their world, but the crystals used to make it were rare and it took a fair amount of spiritual energy to operate one so they weren’t a common household item. For context, Binghe -a great Demon Lord and Master Cultivator- owned three. They were all recordings he’d taken on the sly of his own husband’s equally rare musical performances and Binghe didn’t even get to listen to them that often because people kept trying to *steal* the damn things.

He didn’t exactly *forget* that Shen Qingqiu was a famous scholar and musician, but sometimes Binghe failed to account for the fact that *other* people knew it too. Binghe had immortality pills he didn’t have to guard half as hard as a few zheng recordings by the Xiu Ya Sword, one of which was only notable because it featured his husband muttering the word ‘fuck’ when he fumbled a chord.

Shizun was controlling the music from the tablet, but he’d set it up to transmit to a series of ‘speakers’ situated around the room in out of the way places that immersed the entire space in luxuriant sound. The current piece was a long performance by a trio of ‘traditional’ musicians playing erhu, guzheng, and pipa by the sound of it.

Binghe let his head sink back onto the padded seat back and drifted on the music until he started feeling drowsy enough to move things to the bedroom. He started to sit up a little and, in doing so, got a look over Shizun’s shoulder at what he’d been reading.

The tablet was set to display a block of fairly small text set in a column framed by - -*well.* It was a very good thing Binghe was confident in their relationship otherwise he would have taken issue with all the busty women framing the text as they all but fell out of their revealing dresses. Binghe squinted at the screen to see what kind of content it was that merited *that* kind of marginalia.

It sounded a bit like an adventure story and Binghe was vaguely interested in reading it himself until his gaze flicked across a familiar name and his thoughts came to a shrieking halt.

“Shizun.”

Binghe felt his husband go very, very still. Shizun looked jerkily back over his shoulder to meet Binghe’s gaze.

“Binghe is still awake," Shizun squeaked, clutching the tablet to his chest. It was too late though. Binghe had seen.

“Why…” he asked slowly. “...does a character in that book have my name?”

It was at that moment that Shen Yuan knew that he’d fucked up --and then, without meaning to, he immediately proceeded to make it worse.

“This isn’t a story about Binghe!” He yelped.

His husband’s gaze narrowed. “Isn’t it?” Binghe asked in a deceptively calm tone. “Is there *another* Luo Binghe with a sacred flame huadian on his brow who carries a sword called Xin Mo?”

“Ah…” Shen Yuan wet his lips and winced as he spotted the *exact* moment when his beloved spouse remembered that *yes,* actually, there WAS another Luo Binghe who had all those things.

“Shizun, no!” Binghe grabbed for the tablet. “Why are you reading about *him!?* He’s *terrible!”*

Shen Yuan stuffed it under a cushion, prepared to defend it with his dignity if not his life. “I wasn’t reading it, it was just still open in the browser!”

Binghe’s eyes went wide and Shen Yuan swore because his husband always chose the worst moments to be the most intuitive. Whatever you wanted him to figure out the least was invariably the first conclusion he jumped to. For the novel to be open in the browser he would have had to be reading it before he’d died. Shen Yuan deeply regretted using technology anywhere Binghe could see it. As ever, he’d learned just enough to become dangerous.

“Shizun!”

He lunged for the tablet again and Shen Yuan, veteran middle child, managed to roll them both off the sofa. Unfortunately, his reflexes were still dodgy. Some part of him thought he was four inches taller and a lot stronger than he actually was so instead of pinning Binghe to the carpet he ended up flat on his back with his husband straddling his waist and his own arms pinned overhead.

The position gave him an idea, but for the first time ever he got no response from his husband when he rolled his hips suggestively underneath Binghe’s groin aside from a distracted and apologetic kiss as Binghe fished the tablet out of the couch cushions one-handed.

He woke the screen, casually bypassing the lock screen Shen Yuan had never bothered to explain to him and started to skim the text.

“Binghe, don’t," Shen Yuan gave up his attempts to distract and fell back on his final trump card. *“Please.”*

Sure enough, Binghe’s fingertip paused on the screen and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“Shizun," he rasped after a minute and, oh no, he’d decided to deploy his own trump card. Unshed tears shimmered in his wine-colored eyes. “This is about me. Shouldn’t I get to read it?”

Shen Yuan struggled to sit upright. Binghe sat back on his heels to give him space, but held onto the ipad.

“Binghe… reading that is going to be bad for you," Shen Yuan tried. “It’ll make you unhappy for no reason.”

The ipad had been left open to the Two Faced Princess Arc; one of the nastier revenge plots in the entire work. Luo Binghe had been in peak form after someone used mind-control poison on Ning Yinying. Binghe tracked the culprit down to a medium-sized nation on the other side of the continent whose lands butted up to the outermost edges of his personal domains within the human world. The person responsible was an imperial princess and shadow power behind the throne there. Her motivation wasn’t actually all that bad. She’d been looking to slow down Binghe’s steady expansion in order to give her own nation time to shore up their defenses and stockpile supplies before he swallowed them up.

Unfortunately, the fact that she’d chosen to do it by giving him something closer to home to worry about had just thrown them all directly into Luo Binghe’s crosshairs.

Shen Yuan was pretty sure the protagonist only said about three things in the entire arc that were the unvarnished truth and the bit Shen Yuan had skimmed when he’d realized the book was open in his browser was a section where Binghe was outright gaslighting the antagonist of the arc (and eventual addition to the harem) into believing that a woman she’d poisoned was still alive and just *pretending* to haunt her.

In an inversion of the classic trope, *this* ghost was actually real and -with Luo Binghe’s assistance- she was able siphon off enough living energy off her murderer to take a tangible (i.e. fuckable) form again. This had the unanticipated fringe benefit of setting the princess’s cultivation back so far that it actually erased her memories to a time before she’d been irrevocably tainted by the cutthroat political environment that she grew up in. The princess went from being a minor antagonist to one of Luo Binghe’s biggest assets.

That had been Luo Binghe at his least likable and most manipulative, maybe the worst section of the novel for *his* Binghe to stumble across, aside from ‘The Humbling of Shen Qingqiu.’

“When you ran from me in Jinlan City.” Binghe pulled no punches this time as more pieces fell into place for him, things Shen Yuan would have liked to believe that Binghe didn’t even think about anymore except clearly he did. “Is *this* who you thought I’d become? You thought I was *him.”*

It was such an accurate hit that Shen Yuan couldn’t deny it and all but folded in on himself. It was true. He’d expected to confront the blackened protagonist of Proud Immortal Demon Way, not his unhappy yet still undeniably good and sweet-hearted disciple. “You weren’t," he whispered. “I figured it out.”

It had taken too long, but he’d gotten there in the end at least.

“But this is why you ran away, right?” Binghe shook the ipad. “Whatever happens in this book is what you thought would happen to you?”

“Binghe…” Shen Yuan reached out to take his husband’s free hand. “You’re not that person.”

“Then it’s not a problem if I read the book," Binghe countered and --*fine.* Shen Yuan gave up. Binghe always got his way in the end once he was determined.

“Alright," he held out his hand for the tablet. “I’ll set it to the first chapter for you, *but* I have conditions.”

Assured of his win, Binghe surrendered the tablet. “Your disciple is listening," he said with perfect sincerity and even shuffled backwards a little bit to kneel in a picture-perfect posture of attention, the little shit.

If they were going to do this, they might as well do it right. Shen Yuan logged into his account so that Binghe had access to all the VIP extras and subscriber-only side stories. He held the tablet back for a second before giving it to Binghe. “I want to be with you while you’re reading. In the *room,"* he said. “This is going to upset you and when it happens I want you to put the book down and talk to me. Does Binghe understand?”

“Your disciple will obey.” Binghe held out his hands and Shen Yuan returned it, feeling not unlike someone forced to hand their partner a live grenade.

“Alright, this picture in the corner tells you how much energy the tablet has left," Shen Yuan pointed to the battery indicator and gave his husband a crash course in not letting the tablet die on you in the middle of a chapter before he reluctantly let himself be pulled back onto the couch.

Binghe took his directive to only read when Shen Yuan was directly at hand to heart and spooned them so that Shen Yuan was trapped between his husband and the back of the sofa, which would normally be excellent because he was warm and blocked in on all sides, prime napping conditions *exactly* when he could least afford to nap. He still struggled with fatigue and it took Shen Yuan real will power to keep his eyes open

He amused himself with Candy Crush on his phone so he wouldn’t give into the temptation of trying to screen watch while his husband read. The first break didn’t take long. Binghe’s arm tightened around Shen Yuan’s middle in an early warning before Binghe set down the tablet with a thud.

“My manual was *fake?”* he gasped, utterly betrayed. “Shizun, you said the replacement you gave me was *special!”*

“It was!” Shen Yuan wanted to kick himself. Of all the things he’d expected to happen, getting caught out in one of his own terrible fibs somehow hadn’t been one of them. “I got it off the Original Goods’ shelf. It wasn’t one of the common-use manuals!”

It was, Shen Yuan suspected, the manual intended to be handed down to the Head Disciple when Ming Fan got old enough to benefit from it. However Ming Fan was being compensated with his life, intact limbs, and a Qing Jing Peak to inherit lordship of, so Shen Yuan hadn’t felt at all bad about the theft. He’d certainly made up the difference in personal training over the years.

“But my first manual *was* fake?” Binghe insisted, shaking him by the shoulder. The gesture was gentle, but still urgent. “Why did you lie to me about it?”

Shen Yuan groaned. He was going to lose whatever mystique he’d ever had with his spouse at this rate. Binghe already knew he wasn’t nearly so cold or suave as his reputation in cultivation society would have it, but he’d kind of been hoping to keep the true extent of how deeply uncool he was a

secret. “I didn’t know for sure where you got it." He wiggled around so they were facing each other. “The narrative never actually pointed a finger at any single culprit.”

Binghe scowled, grabbed the tablet and spent a furious couple of seconds scrolling before he too deflated. Shen Yuan knew what line he’d just read.

‘Unbeknownst to the boy, the book he labored over with such particular care was a cruel fake that contained just enough accurate secrets of cultivation to give the user the illusion of some minor progress, although no practitioner who used that manual would ever achieve any true breakthroughs. It was a vicious prank designed to waste a cultivator’s most precious years and stifle dangerous talent. It would be years before he came to suspect anything was wrong with his manual and by then it would be too late to recover.’

“It doesn’t say where you got it from," Shen Yuan explained miserably.

Binghe’s lips made a thin, unhappy line. “It was dispersed to me by the quartermaster for Qing Jing’s affairs on An Ding along with my uniforms and practice weapon.”

“Ah," Shen Yuan flushed and made a note to kick Shang Qinghua’s ass for that later. “My best guesses were the Original Goods or Ming Fan. If it was Shen Qingqiu, then if I replaced it honestly and you asked me why I gave you the fake then I would have had no explanation for why he --why *I* would have done such a thing. If it was Ming Fan, then I didn’t know if the System was messing with him or not. He was an honest and dedicated worker unless you were around. After the Skinner Incident, I couldn’t take the chance that the System wasn’t deliberately turning him into a stupid bully for plot purposes.”

Binghe cocked his head. “What was that about the Skinner?” He made a thoughtful hum as the gears turned in his head.

“The System turned that trip into a mission. It was the first time I had to fight anything in my life. I had no idea what I was doing and there were children depending on me to look after them so the System let me use points to make the mission a little easier.” Shen Yuan winced in hindsight over how badly he’d bungled that encounter. Of course, he learned better eventually. That cringe-inducing incident would forever stand out in his memory, though. “What happened is that the Skinner’s intelligence *plummeted* and it started monologuing.”

“The lightning strike," Binghe mused. “That wasn’t a coincidence either?”

Shen Yuan nodded. “That’s right. I tricked the System into protecting you since I wasn’t doing a very good job by myself," he was rewarded with a stroke down his back and a little squeeze as Binghe indulged them both in a lingering hug.

“Does Shizun know that was when this husband first realized that I might like boys?” he murmured in Shen Yuan’s ear.

“What?” Shen Yuan blinked as the implications sank in. “No. *Really?”*

“Mmmhmm.” Binghe set the tablet aside and Shen Yuan got the feeling that they might well be done with Proud Immortal Demon Way for the evening. “It was when the demon took off Shizun’s clothes. I’d seen men with their shirts off, but they were hairy and ugly. Shizun was different. I couldn’t stop looking, even though I was scared. Shizun’s body was mesmerizing.”

Poor fourteen-year-old Binghe, suddenly learning he was into pretty boys in the middle of a life or death situation. It'd be hilarious if Shen Yuan hadn't been piloting the pretty boy in question.

Shen Yuan's ears went hot. "I did not *earn* those abs," he muttered, turning his hot face into his husband's shoulder. It was true, though. Shen Qingqiu had the kind of definition that Shen Yuan had previously only ever seen on TV, never in real life and *certainly* not in a mirror.

"Oh, but your disciple appreciates them nevertheless," Binghe chuckled. "It was so infuriating. I still didn't trust you much back then. You kept confusing me. I wished you'd just pick a face and stick to it. I felt like I suddenly didn't know you," he snorted at himself. "I suppose I didn't. Shizun, I was *so* torn. You'd had me locked in the woodshed the week before and then you invited me into your carriage the next. You *smiled* at me and hid it like you were shy. It was cute. I didn't know which you was the real you."

"I got docked *so* many points for that," Shen Yuan sighed. "It made me act like Shen Qingqiu at first. It stopped controlling my behavior so strictly after the Skinner demon was defeated as a reward. That's why…"

"...why Shizun changed more after that," Binghe finished his sentence for him with another thoughtful noise. "You could finally be yourself."

How embarrassing. If it was possible, Shen Yuan would have folded in on himself until he vanished from existence. Face flaming, he nodded into Binghe's shoulder again and was rewarded with a lingering kiss against the side of his throat. He was 90% sure that they were about to retire to the bedroom when he heard the fucking tablet wake up again.

Ugh.

Shen Yuan did end up napping in the end. It was cold in the apartment thanks to the AC and his husband was basically a giant hot water bottle that liked to hug. He surfaced a few times when Binghe moved around to acquire a throw blanket, water, and then a longer charge cord. Eventually Shen Yuan woke up a little bit while Binghe carried him into the bedroom and tucked them both into bed.

It was hard to say what woke him up that final time. The apartment was pitch dark and the bedroom was lit only by the glow of the ipad's screen where it lay face-up in Binghe's lap illuminating his hands where they covered his face. Fine tremors ran through his entire body and Shen Yuan was only a little surprised when he looked down and recognized the chapter name on the screen.

'Chapter 1220: Human Stick'

Chapter End Notes

This part was never going to be easy...

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Congratulations! Achievement Unlocked: Psycho in Another Life]

[User has been awarded 50 C-Points! Your total is now 400 C-Points.]

[Notice: Understanding of Shen Yuan is now at 65%! Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

He should have realized that there'd been a very good reason why Shizun had demanded to supervise Binghe while reading the terrible, awful novel.

Binghe had thought he'd be fine even with advance warning that the book was wretchedly bad. It certainly wouldn't have been the first time he'd been personally victimized by his husband's taste in literature, he'd thought. Binghe liked to read, but he didn't often have the time to browse popular bookstores so his recreational reading was generally limited to whatever he found on Shizun's shelf and Shizun liked *trash,* the more unrealistic and melodramatic the better.

How many times had he entered a room to observe his beloved spouse sneering down at a page?

"Is Shizun enjoying his book?" Binghe often asked just to witness the response.

"It is irredeemable *garbage,"* Shizun would reply with his upper lip peeled off his teeth in radiant scorn as he eagerly turned the page.

'Proud Immortal Demon Way' was no different except that it had *far* more sexual content than Binghe was used to. He was glad that his Shizun had drifted off, tucked against his chest, long before the first sex scene arrived. Binghe had nearly thrown the tablet across the room when *Qin Wanyue* started to take off her clothes. There'd even been a picture, drawn from the perspective of Binghe's other self, of her with her shirt off and the barest hint of ample bosom peeking out from beneath her demurely crossed arms as she straddled the boy's waist and looked down at him with a hunger that was anything but maidenly.

Again, he found himself keenly missing home where they colo-coded their pornography *like a reasonable society* with helpful red and yellow covers so that unsuspecting readers couldn't be *blindsided* by the sudden description of someone's genitals. He should have realized the margin art was indicative of the content so he only had himself to blame.

He was well aware that the real Qin Wanyue liked him. The woman had never been subtle about it or dissuaded by first his disinterest and then later his actual marriage *to a man.* Even so, he'd never been able to picture her naked or *that* sexually aggressive. The scene was uncomfortable to read because, as well as he knew himself, he wasn't sure that the Luo Binghe on the page was a whole-heartedly willing participant, not when saying no would mean denying a dying girl her final wish.

Binghe could tell because 'he' didn't initiate *anything* -not even kisses, which were Binghe's favorite part of lovemaking and the thing that he -as a naive virgin- had looked forward to the most. He could and *had* glutted himself for hours in his husband's loving arms doing nothing more exciting than some light petting.

He knew what he was like in bed and it wasn't *this*.

The narrative didn't discuss 'his' feelings at all either, when normally Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky would not *shut up* about Luo Binghe's anger or humiliation.

It made him feel a little cheated on that other Luo Binghe's behalf that the boy had been denied a first time with the person of his choosing. Binghe didn't much like his other self, but the younger and softer version on the page wasn't that person yet. He deserved the good things everyone should have and was consistently robbed of them. It was frustrating.

Binghe's own first time didn't bear thinking about, but at least it had been with the person he wanted and their second time made up for all his losses.

The other Luo Binghe must have been at least a little willing though, because later he married the woman *and* her annoying sister, who not only survived in their world, but turned out to be an excellent foil for Qin Wanyue. Qin Wanrong, for all her own flaws, functioned as a sink for her sister's more irritating character traits. It was hard for Qin Wanyue to get overbearing when her sister ate up every scrap of attention she didn't reserve for their mutual husband.

Although, let it be said that the commitment of marriage was not a particularly grand gesture when made by *that* Luo Binghe. He already had three wives when he brought the Qin sisters into his household; Sha Hualing, Liu Mingyan, and *Shijie of all people.*

By the time the Qin sisters were brought in, Luo Binghe had given up on being surprised by all the places the protagonist of Proud Immortal Demon Way was willing to put his penis. For every woman he married there were at least two that he had casual sex with either before or after (and on one memorable occaision *during)* the point where she tried to kill him. By the time he stopped reading, Binghe was rooting for the assassins.

It wasn't even *interesting* sex, which was somehow worse.

Near as he could tell, the real reason the protagonist never seemed to sleep with the same woman more than three times was so that none of them figured out just how limited his sexual repertoire was. Binghe himself had never been intimate with a woman, but he was fairly certain that even with the different parts involved there was more to it than *in, out, 'oh Lord Luo is so BIG',* and then everybody somehow comes at the same time *every* time. That had never happened to him, not even once, and he wasn't sure he even *wanted* it to. The best part of getting his husband off was being clear-headed enough to watch it happen.

He was becoming more and more sure that Airplane Shooting Towards the Sky had never been intimate with anyone aside from his dominant hand. Foreplay featured in Proud Immortal Demon Way so far not at all and any cuddling that happened only took the form of some bizarre post-coital fawning and petting that was not reciprocated by the protagonist .

The chapters and wives continued to pile up well past the point where the total number eclipsed the absurd. To his frustration (Binghe had no illusions about what he was really reading for and it was *not* his alternate self's mediocre sex life), Shen Qingqiu didn't feature much as Luo Binghe escaped the Abyss and then established his presence within the human realms by taking over Huan Hua Palace as a base camp.

The Huan Hua Palace Master, as in Binghe's own experience, served the sect *and* his granddaughter up to the protagonist on a gilded platter. Luo Binghe accepted both as his rightful

due without the slightest clue that he was being wined and dined by *his mother's murderer.* It didn't come up in the story, not even a hint, and judging by the way things had been going Binghe suspected it wasn't going to.

Binghe had to take a break then and soothe himself by watching his husband sleep curled up against his chest and lightly snoring.

He forged ahead, choosing to take advantage of the fact that he didn't need as much sleep as his husband in order to knock out some more of the book before it was time to make breakfast. Shizun hadn't exaggerated its length. The chapters weren't all that long, but there were a *lot* of them. Writing books that long was only possible if you didn't need to put them on paper, he supposed. Fortunately he could start skimming as soon as people started to take off their clothes and that saved quite a bit of time.

It saved *so* much time that he reached Shen Qingqiu's return to the narrative around half *yin shi.*

He managed to finish the chapter, but only just barely and afterwards he went somewhere inside his head for a little while. When he returned to his body it was at the urging of two warm little hands petting his face.

"Binghe, come back." Shizun had straddled his waist at some point, which illustrated for Binghe in painful detail just how bad that episode had been. Usually nothing could distract him from his husband taking *that* kind of initiative. These moments of disassociation were rare, but did happen sometimes in the wake of the events at Maigu Ridge if something upset him badly enough.

He'd hidden it for a while, thinking he was cursed or spiritually wounded somehow, until Shizun caught him and had to explain that it was just something that happened sometimes as the result of trauma. Binghe honestly would have preferred to be cursed. Curses could be broken. Whatever this was, he was stuck with it.

"There you are," Shizun sighed in relief when he saw Binghe's gaze was tracking again.

Binghe's words were stuck in his throat, but he caught his husband's hands by the wrist and brought them to his mouth so he could press desperate kisses into his Shizun's palms; palms that were attached to wrists and arms and most importantly *still attached to his beloved husband.*

"It didn't happen," Shizun told him even as Binghe rolled them over so he could wrap himself around his spouse like a human cocoon. "Binghe, listen, *it didn't happen."*

That it *could* have was Binghe's problem. That it *had* happened somewhere in the realm of possibilities was Binghe's problem. That he'd stood in that animal's palace and somehow didn't automatically *know* in his heart that the floor was stained with *Shen Qingqiu's blood* was his problem.

Binghe couldn't even say that he wasn't capable of such an act because he *was* . He'd done that to an enemy once and felt nothing beyond mild vindication.

Even if he, personally, could not imagine voluntarily harming his Shizun there was *another* Binghe out there who might, one who'd already killed *his* Shen Qingqiu. Last time that beast just tried to sleep with Shizun, but what if there was a *next* time?

No wonder Shizun had been terrified of him. That other Binghe had gone into the Abyss as a gentle young man not unlike Binghe himself, but emerged from it as a bloodthirsty monster who lied like he breathed and collected people like toys.

“No more book tonight… *today,"* Shizun corrected himself with a glance at the little glowing clock on the side table. “Lay down with me. Binghe doesn’t have to sleep, but you need to lay down. Alright?”

Binghe managed a nod, still not much feeling up to talking.

He did not sleep and Shizun attempted to stay up, but he had trouble skipping sleep even when he had a golden core. Shizun nodded off within fifteen minutes, leaving Binghe to sort through his scattered thoughts. Shizun’s warm, snoozing presence was all he needed to prevent himself from going into another spiral.

Morning didn’t bring much clarity, but it did bring him an excuse to slip out of bed to go start breakfast.

Cooking helped his mood, as it frequently did, and he was feeling almost normal by the time Shizun wandered blearily out of the bedroom to make a beeline for Binghe’s back so he could plant his face between his husband’s shoulder blades and wrap his arms around Binghe’s waist.

“When did Binghe get up?” Shizun asked, eyeing the dishes arranged on the counter. Admittedly, Binghe might have gone overboard a little bit. He couldn’t help it. He’d finally worked up the nerve to experiment with the oven and had been able to make *bread.* A loaf studded with nuts and dried fruit lay cooling off to the side. The smell of it had probably been what lured Shizun out of his blanket nest.

“Not long ago," he lied. “Does Shizun want tea?”

“Mmm. I’ll start the water.” Shizun produced a tea set Binghe had not previously found; a black and gold gaiwan with two plain, nearly translucent porcelain cups. “My mother gave these to me for my coming of age," he offered the information casually, as though Binghe hadn’t spent his life starving for crumbs like these to flesh out the things he knew about the man he loved.

As awful as what he’d learned last night, maybe it was worth it to finally gain access to the whole picture of his husband.

“Madam Bai has refined taste," Binghe admired the gaiwan. The gaiwan wouldn’t have looked out of place in his principal palace.

“You don’t know the half of it," Shizun chuckled as he filled the self-heating kettle and set the water to boil. “I told you about designers, right?”

Binghe nodded. “Renowned craftspeople," he said to show he remembered.

“Sort of. Maybe more like renowned workshops operating under a single name," Shizun clarified. “The things we bought at that last garment shop were like that, but there are some brands that are so rare and exclusive their wares are hideously expensive or impossible to find. Mom was dressed in clothes like that from head to toe even if it all looked very plain.”

That seemed in character from what he'd seen of Madame Bai. She had a palpable aura of dominance, but a very soft touch. She wouldn't shove her wealth or power in your face, but it would be noticeable to those who knew to look.

Binghe really *did* like her.

Once they were able to return for regular visits then Binghe would take special pains to track some of that stuff down just to prove to his mother in law that he could be the right kind of provider for her son.

Shizun had dressed in one of the outfits Binghe had picked out for him; a soft jade colored sweater over a pair of wide-legged wrapped pants that split up the sides and gave Binghe tantalizing glimpses of his husband's calves, sometimes even his knees. If they were home then Binghe would have gone for the jewelry box. Those ankles were begging for gold.

"Stop dressing me up in your brain." Shizun shot Binghe a look over his shoulder, having sensed the direction of his thoughts.

"Should this husband *un* dress you instead?" Binghe sidled up to him with a purr. He slid one hand through the layered sides of his beloved's trousers to caress the warm, smooth skin of his thigh. Yes, Binghe liked the fashion of this world *very* much.

"Feed me first then we'll talk," was Shizun's tart reply. He looked over the array of youtiao, several different types of jiaozi, douhua, and congee topped with shredded meat and vegetables. "It's dangerous to make so much food, Binghe. If we're unlucky then...."

As though summoned by his words there was an inquisitive noise from the security panel by the front door. Shizun winced and went over to check the camera. Binghe followed in case it was Jiu-ge again, but no. It was a petite young woman wearing a cotton facemask like the one Shizun had given him to wear when they first went out. Hers was a pale lavender.

"...then the teenager will show up," Shizun sighed and pressed the intercom. "Meimei, usually people call before they come over to visit."

"Jiu-ge spent the night at the house and Qi-ge showed up this morning to come get him. I think they're having another stupid fight and I cannot deal with it on my day off," she replied. "Let me in. I'm your least obnoxious sibling. You love me and want to feed me."

"Well, I suppose that's true..." Shizun allowed. "....but have you looked at your competition?"

"I'll look at *your* competition," she muttered. *"Ge!"*

Shizun released the exterior door. "Come on in. I have company, but he made breakfast."

Binghe was already running for the bedroom. He'd made a strategic decision to keep wearing at little as possible while in the apartment. He was going to need to get back to the book soon and Shizun had trouble arguing with Binghe when he was naked. He was going to have to rethink his strategy. The Shen family got up too early! Binghe's husband was clearly an aberration sent from the Heavens to lure Binghe into making mistakes.

He made it back to the living room - dressed in an outfit that Shizun didn't blink at so it probably wasn't weird- a few seconds before Meimei knocked at the apartment door.

Like Madame Bai, Shizun greeted his sister with a bone-breaking hug.

Shen Mingyu was a tall woman, probably in her late teens with long dark hair and somber brown eyes that… that…

Binghe was suddenly very glad that the siblings' focus was on each other because even with the mask -perhaps *because* of the mask- he recognized the young woman in front of him.

Liu Mingyan.

Only, she wasn't part of the Liu clan in this world. *Here* she was a Shen.

"I saw you just last week," she snorted at Shizun, but made absolutely no attempt to escape the hug. "You're acting like you thought I died." Mingyu glanced over Binghe, comparing him against some internal checklist and graced him with a calm nod that he recognized as Liu-shimei's sign of approval.

"Mingyu, this is Luo Binghe. We're… um." Shizun colored. "Involved. He's my boyfriend."

Mingyu cocked a slender brow at her brother. "Luo Binghe like…?" The look in her eyes told Binghe she had read *Proud Immortal Demon Way* and didn't have a great opinion about it. Well, that made sense. Liu-shimei was a great reader, but also a woman of refined taste and exacting standards.

"It's a coincidence," he hastened to assure her.

Of course the System had to put its incomprehensible two-bits in and announced, [Congratulations! Achievement Unlocked: Broke Your Man Out of the Glass Closet]

Shizun hastily changed the subject. "Do you want coffee, Mingyu? I started tea, but I can make a pot for you."

"Tea's fine." Mingyu followed them into the kitchen and sniffed appreciatively. "Wow." She glanced at Shizun, but he rolled his eyes before she could say anything.

"I'll be fine," he said. "You'll see."

Shizun shamelessly loaded his sister's bowl for her and she accepted it with an eyeroll that slowly morphed into wide-eyed surprise as she took a bite followed by several more in rapid succession.

[Congratulations! Achievement Unlocked: Get You One Who Can Do Both]

[User has been awarded 100 C-Points! Your total is now 500 C-Points.]

[User has gained 200 Reputation points with Shen Mingyu!]

[Shen Mingyu's current attitude towards User: Extremely Positive!]

Breakfast taught Binghe the meaning of Shizun's earlier fear, however. Mingyu was still growing and that meant she ate like she was getting ready to hibernate. He might have made too much for two men who didn't actually need to eat much, but he'd made just barely enough for them plus Shizun's sister.

An entire lifetime ago, a frail old woman that he called mother had loaded the lion's share of their thin supper into his bowl and said -without lying- 'I love to see a young person who eats well.'

"There's more tea eggs in the fridge," Binghe said, already getting up. "Let me cut some up for you."

"Ge," Mingyu hissed as soon as he was out of mortal earshot. "How are you eating that?"

Binghe looked. Shizun was dipping his spoon into a cup of zheng dan custard drizzled with sesame oil and a garnish of diced prawns and green onion. That was, as far as Binghe had been aware, one of his husband's favorite side dishes. His toes curled against the tiled floor as he considered the possibility that it wasn't that Shizun liked steamed eggs in general. It was that he only liked *Binghe's* carefully engineered recipe.

Huh.

He was going to have to revisit that feeling later when there wasn't a delicate young maiden in the house.

"Binghe has some of the same texture problems I do," Shizun lied without batting an eyelash. Binghe silently committed to the story. It sounded better than any suggestions he'd had so far. They were probably going to get this question again before long.

It might even be true, now that he thought about it, although to a far lesser degree. If he'd had Shizun's issues then he probably wouldn't have survived childhood. There'd been periods where the only thing he ate in a day was whatever he found laying in the street.

Binghe could stubbornly choke down just about anything, but he had more stringent requirements for his diet when it came to preference. He'd gotten a reputation among the Huan Hua cultivators back when he was a guest disciple for passing up famous restaurants in favor of making his dinner over a campfire, even though he could easily afford to eat out for every meal.

Oddly, Binghe had never really considered things from that angle. He'd just known that he didn't like other people's food and couldn't make himself eat it if he had any other options. Binghe was glad of it now, obviously, because it had led him to inadvertently being a better partner to his future husband.

Mingyu greeted his return with a whole-body swell of enthusiasm. "Yesssss," she crooned, accepting the little dish of marinated eggs like jade and gold. "You can't ever break up with him, Ge," she informed Shizun. "I'll *cry."*

Binghe got close to crying when his husband's response was a fond smile shot in his direction and the softness in Shizun's eyes when he said, "Well, we can't have *that."*

Shen Yuan was totally ready to monopolize his sister all day and Binghe wasn't too far behind him, what with the way he kept trying to feed her. The way to Mingyu's heart was through her stomach and Binghe was making excellent progress by the time her phone chirped with the custom notification she had for their mother. It was the first five seconds of 'Boss B*tch' by Doja Cat, a song he'd deleted from his memory until just now.

“Oh hey, good timing,” Mingyu looked up from her screen at Binghe. “Mom says she forgot to ask for your phone number yesterday. I think she wants to add you to a group chat.”

Oh fuck. Shen Yuan had forgotten about this aspect of their cover story.

Binghe kept an admirable cool and just said, “I’m afraid I don’t have one.”

“She can add me if I’m not already on it for now,” Shen Yuan told her, already trying to remember if he had his own phone service or if he was on the family plan. It was these kind of petty details of his old life that kept escaping him. It was going to suck if they were here long enough for him to have to pay a bill. His phone calendar was updated with reminders, but it was going to take him a minute to remember all his log-ins. “Binghe doesn’t have a phone. We’re talking about getting him one, but he hasn’t made a decision yet.”

“Oh yeah?” Fortunately, Mingyu didn’t seem suspicious. “Are you from the country?” she asked and perked up when Binghe nodded. “Wait.” She looked back and forth between Shen Yuan and Binghe with narrowed eyes. “Is this a visit or is this something permanent?”

“Well, you *did* say we can’t break up…” Shen Yuan broke off laughing as Mingyu rained down ineffective fists on his shoulder. “Yes! Binghe is moving in. We’ve been seeing each other for a while.”

Hopefully he wasn’t setting his husband up for suspicion of murder if they couldn’t find a way to come back to Beijing, but he wanted to keep any lies he had to tell minor. Plus, Binghe would internalize anything Shen Yuan said that minimized their relationship in any way and he didn’t want that. Shen Yuan could hardly get his husband to call any of their residences ‘home’ as it was. The only welcome he ever seemed sure of was the one he found in Shen Yuan’s arms, which was awesome but also made him worry constantly about his husband’s mental health.

“Wow, so it’s *serious*- serious,” Mingyu whistled, impressed, and got up to walk over to Binghe. She opened her arms and asked, “Are hugs good?”

Binghe looked like she’d asked him if he wanted to be slapped instead, but slowly nodded. He made a wounded little noise as she wrapped him up in her arms and squeezed. The real waterworks started up when Mingyu ruffled his bangs and pinched his cheeks. (Shen Yuan had come by his habits the same way she did, via their parents.)

“Si-ge,” she decided out loud and then frowned thoughtfully, “Bing-ge? Bing-er? A-Bing? A-Luo?”

“Binghe is fine until you think of something you like,” Binghe coughed to clear his throat. “Thank you.”

Mingyu came over and kissed Shen Yuan on the cheek. “Tell me if you guys ever decide to do a xingchun. I know some girls from school who would probably be interested in a few years.”

The word fell into Shen Yuan’s peace like a stone. Right. Like his passwords, he’d forgotten some of the bad things about being back home. He was going to have to explain that to Binghe later.

Binghe kept quiet until Mingyu had to leave, but as soon as she left he turned and asked -in all innocence, “Shizun, what’s a ‘xinghun’?”

That hadn’t taken long.

“It’s short for Xingshihunyin,” he rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s a cooperative marriage. There’s some laws in this country that make it hard for men like us to be together. It was actually illegal for a while. If we applied for a marriage license, it probably wouldn’t be granted.”

To be honest, their marriage was only permissible back home because commoner society didn’t really interfere in what cultivators did and also because there was no one left in cultivation society who had the balls to tell Binghe what he could or could not do in his private life. In a very real way, gay marriage was possible back home because Binghe willed it so. Even then they hadn’t had a public ceremony, it had been just them making their solemn promises to one another. It had seemed right to him at the time.

Binghe squinted thoughtfully, “For children?” He was taking this a lot better than Shen Yuan would have guessed, but then again the world of Proud Immortal Demon Way had socially acceptable polygamy where a very common reason for bringing concubines into the house was to address a childless marriage. Marrying someone just for children wasn't actually an alien concept for him. He was probably missing some nuances, like the fact the nice lesbian lady that one of them could theoretically marry in this scenario would have her own girlfriend and household away from them, but it was close enough.

“That’s right,” Shen Yuan agreed. “There are other reasons, but mostly that.”

“Then, Shizun, we don’t need it.” Binghe came over and pulled him into a gentle hug. Oh heaven, *he* was trying to comfort *Shen Yuan.* “I know many options back home if we ever want a child.” He paused and added, “I’m not in any hurry to use them, but if Shizun wants one someday then we can have one.”

“Give me some time to forget how much trouble my current disciples cause,” Shen Yuan chuckled, patting Binghe’s back. “Binghe is lucky I don’t age there. I would have all gray hair by now thanks to your shijie alone.”

Binghe made a thoughtful noise and reached for Shen Yuan’s wrist, “You said there are no cultivators here, but I still have my cultivation. This body isn’t so old. You might not be as strong here as back home, but…” he trailed off with a blink.

“What?” Shen Yuan asked.

“Shizun…” Binghe checked the pulse on Shen Yuan’s other wrist, but his temple only creased further. “...are you *sure* there can’t be any cultivators in this world?”

Chapter End Notes

LBH and SY, even more spiritually compatible than you thought. Especially when it comes to literature critique. God help Airplane when LBH figures out there's a COMMENTS section.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The illumination talisman that Binghe scrounged out of one of his storage gems sputtered to life for five tremulous seconds before fading out. In that time, Shizun broke out into a full body sweat and had to sit down, but Binghe's hypothesis was confirmed. At last, he knew what his blood parasites had been up to all this time that had them dying off at such an unprecedented rate.

When they'd arrived in this world, Shizun carried all his spiritual energy with him. Binghe had identified him by it, after all, but it had been formless. His body didn't have the meridians or dantians necessary to cultivate so his qi was still and inaccessible inside of him --or at least it was until Binghe shared blood with him.

What few people knew was that Binghe' parasites were intelligent, but only sort of. They were capable of complex, self-governed tasks. However, there were only a few circumstances under which they'd act under their own initiative and it was almost always in order to preserve the life of their current host. Their intelligence was distributed across their entire population, like a hive mind. It was how he could use them to track anyone he'd infected with his blood and why inoculating the target with blood from another Heavenly Demon interfered with his parasites' ability to communicate with the larger colony. The colonies merged inside their secondary host and became unable to tell which 'mother' colony was their original one.

Like Binghe, they identified hosts other than Binghe by qi and about the only person whose body they'd know better than Binghe's was Shen Qingqiu's. The parasites must have perceived Shizun's missing meridians as something like an amputation and then made the executive decision to *rebuild* his spiritual circulation system.

"I should have realized," Binghe apologized, carrying his groggy Shizun to the bedroom. "I taught them how to do that in order to rebuild your shattered meridians when…" he paused, struggling to vocalize it even now, "...during those years when Shizun was away."

Shizun patted his cheek. "I'm just glad I finally know what's happening," he sighed. "I've been so tired. I was starting to get worried."

"Let me give you more blood," Binghe said as he laid his husband down on the mattress and helped him sit up. "It'll go faster if there's more of them to share the work."

"Mmn, alright," Shizun scrubbed sleepily at his heavy eyelids.

Binghe's heart turned over in his chest at the sight of his husband drinking blood from his cupped palm without hesitation or fear. The wound had closed long before Shizun swiped his warm tongue over the place it had once been, but Binghe still felt the care implied in the gesture. He kissed the lingering blush of red off his husband's lower lip.

"Lay down with me for a while?" Shizun asked, already beginning to get drowsy again.

"Of course," Binghe promised. Like he wanted to be anywhere else. "Close your eyes. I won't go anywhere."

[User has been awarded 10 C-Points! Your total is now 510 C-Points.]

He hid his wince, but Shizun was already nodding off. He had no idea what those points were for, but hadn't Shizun warned him that the System was arbitrary and whimsical?

The transfusion of parasites had an immediate effect. Shizun napped on and off for the rest of the day. Binghe woke him up for water and food, but now that he knew what he was watching for he could tell that the blood parasites' progress had taken off. Shizun slept through the night and well into the next day, but his spiritual constitution was more robust every time Binghe checked so he wasn't concerned. The System kept awarding him points at random intervals, so he'd apparently unlocked some progress in this mission that it had unilaterally decided not to elaborate on.

He was not expecting company, but the security panel rang late in the afternoon heading into early evening. To his surprise, Mingyu was waiting outside when he carefully answered her buzz.

"Can I come up and hang out for a while?" she asked, looking a little red around the eyes. It didn't look like she was sick, but she was definitely upset.

"Of course," Binghe told her and reminded himself he was new here. She wouldn't appreciate it if he offered her a cathartic murder.

"Where's Ge?" Mingyu asked when he let her into the apartment.

"He's not feeling well so he's taking a nap," Binghe took her jacket and bag the way he'd seen Shizun do.

"Yeah? I'll be quiet then," Mingyu promised then she gave him a sideways look. "Are you going to ask why I came over?"

"You can tell me if you want to," Binghe replied. In all honesty, he hated being asked to talk when he was upset. The only person he'd do it for was Shizun because Shizun didn't care if he cried and would pet his hair until he felt better. With anyone else, he just wanted space to process. "You can also drink tea and eat some Bing Pi with me instead. I came across some moulds in the cupboard and A-Yuan found a recipe for me to experiment with."

"That sounds amazing, but you really need your own phone," Mingyu's eyes crinkled at the corners. Her mask today was a deep violet with realistic silver stars scattered across the cheeks and the bridge of her nose like freckles. "Ge gets really into his webnovels so he's the worst person ever to have to share with. We had to share one for a while when we were kids and just about killed each other. I'll tell mom and she can put you on the family plan. If you're staying then you should get the full saosao treatment."

"Tea first," Binghe said, rather than address the complicated feelings that bubbled up from the bottom of his poor patched-up heart in response to his sister-in-law's easy and total acceptance of him.

She was wrapped up in a blanket on the sofa when he came back with hot green tea and a few of the nicer custard-filled snow skin mooncakes he'd been experimenting with that morning. They were still a touch too plain for his taste or to serve to Shizun, but Mingyu inhaled the entire plate with happy little noises that told him she didn't mind plainess. He gave her the rest of the batch because he planned to remake the recipe with fruit centers for Shizun's dessert.

Mingyu was true to her word and stayed quiet as Binghe went back to his puttering in the kitchen. This refrigerator was going to spoil him. He had an ice cave underneath one of his palaces, but it had been built by the original owner as a place to store bodies for experimentation. It was too dirty, too cold, and too inconvenient to use like this.

“Are your parents expecting you tonight?” he asked once it started to get close to the dinner hour.

“I’m living in a dorm not far from here,” she explained. “I’m in my first year of university.” Then her gaze dropped. “Do you think Ge would mind if I slept on the couch? One of my roommates has a boy over and I don’t want to be around when the dorm monitor catches her. Plus, you know, I don’t want to be in there if they’re doing it.”

That was something he had not been expecting to learn about this world. He had no room to judge others for a premarital relationship. He and Shizun were cultivation partners for months before it occurred to him that marriage was actually an option for them. That said, there was some sexual etiquette that he’d assumed was common sense. Apparently not.

“I think A-Yuan doesn’t want you anywhere near that situation,” he said since ‘tell me where the dormitory is and I’ll go snap his dick off at the root so he won’t be anyone’s problem anymore’ wasn’t likely to be received well. “In all sincerity, neither do I. Stay for dinner and I’ll make a bed for you.”

He was already determined to do whatever it was he needed to in order to keep his husband, but the idea of never being able to come back here was starting to hurt all on its own. The System sure knew what it was doing when it set up the structure of this game.

A short while later, Mingyu giggle-snorted over on the couch. She was curled up with her phone watching short little picture shows of people dancing or doing comedic skits, which seemed harmless and charming to him. “Oh man,” she chuckled and his curiosity got the better of him.

“Is what you’re watching good?” he asked and was beckoned over.

The show played over again with a man laying on his back with his shoulders on the ground as he lifted his back, hips, and legs off the ground to hover in time to the music. In Binghe’s opinion, he wasn’t doing a very good job. He almost slipped several times and maybe that was impressive if you weren’t a cultivator.

“I could do better,” Binghe’s mouth said without consulting his better judgement.

“Oh yeah?” Mingyu looked at him with bright eyes. “Prove it,” she breathed, phone clutched tight in her excitement.

Shen Yuan woke up from his sudden death nap to the smell of food and distant electronic music. Then a woman laughed and… oh, Mingyu was visiting. Why? It was a school night.

She and Binghe were in the living room when he shuffled in, still tired yet feeling better than he had since waking up back in his old body.

Mingyu had her phone out and was recording Binghe as he did some sort of strange inverted push up. Binghe paused, rock solid in the middle of his press, when he spotted Shen Yuan. Binghe

transitioned into a forearm stand, which looked more comfortable to hold than whatever he'd been doing before. "Did we wake you?" he asked, concerned. "Do you need us to be quieter?"

Like he was going to voluntarily make them stop playing. He couldn't even get Binghe to relax back when he actually was a disciple. These days, it'd take an act of god--or a cute little sister. Shen Yuan briefly considered what it would be like to go home, knowing what he was giving up this time and he had to make a hard mental swerve before he got swept into a riptide of unpleasant emotion.

'Don't think about it,' he told himself. 'Trust your husband. He's the protagonist. Whatever happens will be the best of all options.'

"No, I could smell dinner," Shen Yuan said as he went into the kitchen. He affectionately patted Binghe's ass on his way past since it *was* right there. A few seconds later it occurred to him that he'd probably walked right through Mingyu's shot. "Sorry Meimei, did I ruin your --TikTok?" It took him a beat to remember which app it was that was popular when he'd died.

"No, Ge," she said with a glowing expression that told him he didn't want any further details. "You made it even better."

The phone rang as he got stuff together for tea. Binghe had made a pot, but it had long since gone cold and moreover had been drunk down to some cloudy dregs. "Hi mom," he answered.

"Yuan-er, leaving aside the fact that you asked Bing-er to move in without telling me, when were you going to get that boy a phone?" his mother laid into him right off and Shen Yuan sighed as he moved his phone onto his shoulder.

"Mingyu ratted us out, huh?" he asked wryly.

"She didn't sell you cheaply," Bai Huiqing reassured him. "I wasn't surprised. You two have the energy of a long-term couple and he's rearranged your kitchen, but you can already find things in it. What happened? Was it because you've been sick?"

"Well, he wasn't *happy* about that," Shen Yuan muttered. Everything he knew about maintaining a lie, he'd learned from this woman. The trick was to lie without lying, to present a truth that could stand on its own yet still led your audience in the direction you wanted them to go. "It just seemed like time. He doesn't know what kind of phone he wants and we haven't sat down to talk about budget."

"Ridiculous," Bai Huiqing scoffed at the idea of a 'budget.' She wasn't a careless spender, but her idea of a budget tended to encompass entire projects, not daily necessities. She discouraged her children from having an excess of belongings, but what they did have should be the best available. "You act like you've ever had to buy a phone in your entire life. I'll take him shopping tomorrow and he can get whatever he likes." She was thoughtfully quiet for a moment, a bad sign. "Mingyu said he lived out in the country before. Does he have enough clothes? We'll make a day out of it and get him whatever he needs."

'RIP, my poor black lotus,' Shen Yuan thought. "Be nice to him, mom. He's not used to the city."

"You can be nice to him for me," she replied breezily. *Oh no.* "I noticed you're dressing better these days too. I want to buy you some good shirts too, ones with no words on them. You need new dress shoes while I'm thinking of it."

“Mom!” Shen Yuan wanted to complain, but Binghe came up to hug him from behind just then. “I -- *look,* I promised Binghe that he can pick out my clothes from now on. If you want me to wear things, take it up with him.”

The arms around him tightened and he felt Binghe’s lips curve in a toothy smile against his neck. Great. Shen Yuan had probably just screwed himself over, but at least it made his husband happy. His mom too, probably.

“Oh?” Bai Huiqing asked in a keen sort of interest that suggested he might have just screwed himself. “Then we’ll have a *very* nice day tomorrow, won’t we?”

“Shizun, why did I get points just now?” Binghe murmured into his ear, in deference to their house guest, once the call was ended.

“Who knows?” Shen Yuan replied and kissed his husband’s cheek just because he could. “Are you and Meimei enjoying yourselves?”

“Yes,” Binghe sounded a little surprised by it himself.

“I always knew you two would get along,” Shen Yuan said and smiled to himself. “I’m glad I was right.”

“Did Shizun think about that often?” Binghe asked quietly.

Shen Yuan nodded. “I did sometimes when you were younger and then more often after we got married,” he said. He’d tried not to. It just made him sad, but sad in a way that he couldn’t talk about if his husband noticed and Binghe *always* noticed. “Mom wants to get you your own cellphone tomorrow.”

“Will it work back home?” Binghe asked, looking interested. He seemed to like the tablet, but Shen Yuan had noticed Binghe eyeing his iphone speculatively.

“Some parts will work as long as the battery lasts, like the matching game and the calculator.” Shen Yuan was pretty sure it wouldn’t explode if they brought one back with them. “Not every feature will work, though. Do you remember the towers I pointed out earlier? There’s an entire global network of them that connects the cellphones to one another.”

“So we lack the necessary infrastructure.” Binghe sounded a little disappointed, but not totally surprised or even defeated for that matter. He had that look, like he was shuffling projects in his head.

“Would Binghe like me to find you some books on the topic?” Shen Yuan didn’t think it was possible to perfectly recreate the cellular network in a Xianxia world, but he was curious to see what Binghe and his protagonist halo would do with the concept.

“Would Binghe like me to find you some books on the topic?”

Binghe wondered if his husband would ever realize how rare his attitude was. Anyone else would already be arguing with him about whatever it was they thought he was up to. Shizun just offered him reference material and faith that, whatever Binghe did, it would be worthwhile.

“Thank you,” Binghe said and squeezed his husband tight.

Mingyu did not end up staying the night. She got a call as they were tidying up after dinner. The girl she roomed with had indeed gotten caught sneaking a boy into the room, but the dormitory monitor did a room search and found evidence that she’d also been filching jewelry from their other roommates so Mingyu had to go back to the dorm to see if any of her things were in the cache of stolen items they’d found under the girl’s mattress.

“There’s going to be a disciplinary hearing for sure,” Mingyu groused as she got her things together.

Shizun was no happier, but for a different reason. “That girl won’t get kicked out of the room unless she gets expelled. Pack up anything you don’t want to lose and take it back home until we can find you a good lock box,” he told her. “I’ll send you some money to hire a car.”

“Mom already did,” she chuckled. “She told me to come with you guys tomorrow. I lost some earrings earlier in the semester and thought they would show up, but Lingjiao or her stupid boyfriend probably pawned them already. They’ve been spending a lot of money lately. They were the ones I brought to wear to my internship interviews so Mom wants to see if the jeweler has another pair.”

“Were we going to a jewelry store?” Shizun asked with misgiving.

“Mom asked if Binghe had any accessories and I told her I hadn’t seen him wearing much,” Mingyu replied. She looked over at Binghe. “Don’t let her bully you into getting anything you don’t want, but I saw you like to wear rings.”

“I do,” Binghe agreed, running his thumb along the inside of the storage ring on his right hand. He did, just maybe not for any reason she might predict.

The nephrite thumb ring on his right held emergency shelter and medicine along with enough clothes, food, and water to supply two in comfort for several months. The engraved gold band on his left hand had less capacity, but was heavily enchanted so it couldn’t be removed from his possession. That one held his mother’s guanyin, a few trinkets Shizun had given him when he was a disciple, the first book Binghe ever read cover-to-cover by himself, and a smaller emergency stash.

Shizun had mentioned they didn’t have storage magic here so Binghe could see how Mingyu could make that mistake. Even so, the fact that she’d been watching made him feel warm inside.

Binghe could somewhat understand his husband’s misgivings regarding the jewelry store. He’d seen what some people would wear in this world and call it ‘street fashion.’ There could be an alarming number of spikes involved. Shizun was more conservative than that. Binghe himself didn’t wear much gold or silver either unless it served a practical purpose for his cultivation or he needed to make an impression, but Shizun had little in this world aside from a ‘wristwatch’ and some belts. The timekeeping piece was nice and Shizun assured him that ‘Versace’ was enough for just about any occasion, but Binghe was not convinced.

“Don’t go overboard,” Shizun grumbled at him.

“Never,” Binghe promised, kissing his husband on the forehead.

He was somewhat glad that Mingyu wouldn't be staying the night because it meant they could be at ease in the house and Binghe didn't need to be circumspect when Shizun gave him a very abbreviated lesson about mobile phones. They were fortunately much like a smaller tablet, which he'd already mastered, only with some added functionality so Binghe felt ready when Madame Bai arrived bright and early the next morning (coincidentally right in time for breakfast) and dragged them away to collect Mingyu.

First up was the 'electronics' store. It was a short trip. Binghe wanted the same phone Shizun had. For one, he already knew how to use it and, for another, Shizun's standards were exacting enough that there likely wasn't anything better on the market.

Second, they went to the jewelry store where Binghe's alliance with Madame Bai became cemented.

"We're only here to buy earrings for Mingyu!" Shizun said as Binghe slid a white gold band onto his thumb.

"Meimei already has her earrings," Binghe replied placidly. Mingyu looked up from the shop's comfortable lounge area where she was enjoying a break with a tall glass of fruit infused water as she played a game on her phone that Binghe planned to ask her about later. Binghe turned to the very attentive shop assistant and asked, "Do you carry ankle bangles?"

"Yes, sir, of course!" the young woman replied with enough enthusiasm to tell Binghe she got commission on each sale.

"Binghe, I don't need anklets!" Shizun complained only to be shushed by his mother.

"Don't make promises you don't intend to keep, Yuan-er," she chided him and turned her sparkling gaze on Binghe. Whatever ideal of aesthetic masculinity Shizun had picked up as a young man, he clearly hadn't discovered it under her watch. "Didn't you tell your young man you'd wear what he picked out for you?"

"That's when it's on my dime," Shizun defended himself even though it was clear to everyone involved that he would cave in front of the slightest argument from her. "You haven't even set a budget!"

"Pick out whatever you like," Madame Bai directed Binghe, as imperious as a queen, without giving any sign that she'd been listening to her son. "He never lets me spoil him unless it's Christmas or his birthday. Don't forget something for yourself as well."

Setting aside the question of 'Christmas' and why it was an exception to the rule along with Shizun's birthday, Binghe had a momentary flash of greed and decided to indulge it. "It would make me very happy if you picked something for me," Binghe replied quietly.

Madame Bai's smile softened and she gently pinched his cheek. "Such a charmer," she said.

"Now you've done it," Shizun informed him quietly, yet with a fond smile.

"What did I do?" Binghe asked.

"You'll see," Shizun replied and submitted to being decorated without further complaints or dragging his feet.

Mingyu came to Shizun's rescue eventually by declaring that she was hungry, but they left with several very heavy bags. Madame Bai did pick out something for Binghe, a fine wristwatch that coordinated with Shizun's 'Versace' watch, but *then* she picked out several black 'titanium' rings, a thick gold chain bracelet, and a cuff that fit the shell of his ear.

"I couldn't choose," she told him insincerely as the clerk wrapped up their purchases in a palpable good mood. "You'll have to let me indulge."

"It's too much…" Binghe started to protest. He'd gotten a glimpse of the total and thanks to their earlier outings, he understood that the watch alone was *staggeringly* expensive, but then Shizun elbowed him in the ribs and gave him a *look* that invoked the many past occasions when Binghe had blithely ignored similar objections from his husband. The angle of Shizun's brows told him that he'd earned this fate and had better submit to it. Binghe wilted and gave in, "...thank you. I will treasure it all."

In deference to Shizun's dietary restrictions, they were returning to the apartment so they could put the bags somewhere safe and Binghe could make lunch. Shizun had told Binghe that this was a relatively safe area of the city, but the fine hairs on the back of Binghe's neck began to stir about halfway there.

They passed through a quiet street without any other foot traffic or shops and that's when someone spoke up behind them.

"Hey there, do any of you ladies know the time?"

They paused and turned as one just in time for the man who'd approached them -largish, broad in the shoulder and waist, dressed in a worn coat with a cloth face mask and a brimmed cap pulled low over his eyes- took a knife out of his pocket. It was maybe four inches long with a dull-looking, nicked edge.

"Hand over the bags," the man said. "I don't want trouble, but I won't hesitate either."

Binghe turned to Shen Yuan with a five page essay -double-sided and single spaced- written in his eyes about how *good* he'd been all this time and how much he *deserved* this.

Shen Yuan sighed and held out his hand to accept the bags Binghe had been carrying. "Be fast..." Shen Yuan ordered. "...and *don't* ruin your clothes."

"Hey! Eyes on me!" the mugger hissed, about half a second before Binghe hit him in a flying clothesline directly to the throat. He landed hard on his back and yelped as Binghe stepped on his wrist, disarmed him, tossed the knife towards Shen Yuan, and then got their assailant by the collar.

Shen Yuan stepped on the knife blade as Binghe dragged the mugger off to the narrow little blind alley that the guy must have been hiding in as he waited for a good victim to come off of the street.

Mingyu and their mother were fine when Shen Yuan glanced back to check on them. He hadn't been very worried about them. They didn't scare easily and Mingyu competed in MMA at the international level so they would have been fine even if Binghe hadn't been there. As he'd expected, they were staring at the mouth of the alley Binghe had disappeared into with flat, unimpressed gazes--not unlike a pair of Siamese cats.

Binghe emerged from the alley after a minute or so worth of intensely violent noises with a radiant glow. His complexion was so refreshed and luminescent that Shen Yuan had, not for the first time, the kind of thought you usually didn't have about your spouse.

'He needs more exercise than he's been getting here,' Shen Yuan decided quietly.

"Binghe, your collar!" Shen Yuan said out loud as he noticed a fine stippling of red staining his husband's brand new shirt.

"It's not blood!" Binghe lied, badly. He reached up to brush down his front with both hands and subtle, practically invisible waves of spiritual energy rippled across his clothes in their wake. The red dots vanished like they'd never even existed.

It perhaps said something about Shen Yuan's husband that Binghe's greatest, most sophisticated original spell was designed to get rid of bloodstains on the fly before they had a chance to set.

"See? It was just dust," Binghe said as he reached down to pick up the knife. He tossed it into a storm drain before holding his hand out to take his bags back.

"Nice," Mingyu chuckled. "I should have realized you weren't just a pretty face. San-ge has a type."

"He does?" Binghe asked.

"I do?" Shen Yuan echoed. That was news to him. Binghe was the first man he'd ever even considered being in a relationship with. He'd been assuming that Binghe was his gay exemption, not an indication of a trend.

"How are you still in denial?" Mingyu asked him, looking bewildered. "I saw the posters on your walls when we were kids!"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Shen Yuan wanted to know, but Binghe distracted him by swiping the rest of the bags Shen Yuan was holding while Mingyu was distracting him. He started to complain, but was cut off when Binghe pressed a kiss to his temple. That always made him go soft inside and forget what they were talking about.

"Don't worry about it," Binghe said and exchanged some kind of significant look with Mingyu.

"Mom?" Shen Yuan asked as he noticed an odd look on his mother's face. "You alright?"

She shook it off and smiled at him. "It's nothing dear," she assured him. "Your young man is *very* handy, isn't he?"

"He is," Shen Yuan agreed.

"Where did you say you two met?" she asked.

"Through mutual friends," Shen Yuan lied. Airplane-bro was a trial from god, not a friend, but close enough. Arguably, this entire relationship was Shang Qinghua's fault and Shen Yuan was happy to blame him. "I have some friends on Zhongdian who introduced us."

"Oh, so you met online?"

“Sort of,” Shen Yuan allowed. “We knew each other for a long time before we started dating.”

“I see.” Bai Huiqing stroked his cheek. “Don’t look so worried, darling. Nothing is wrong.”

Shen Yuan wasn’t convinced, but let it go for the moment. He wanted his family’s approval, especially if this was the only chance they’d all have to spend time together.

They returned to Shen Yuan’s apartment. Binghe made lunch and, for a while at least, Shen Yuan forgot about that odd moment. His mother was on the quiet side, but Dad was texting her so she was likely just distracted.

After they were done and Shen Yuan had done the dishes, he came back into the living room to find his mother examining Binghe’s hand.

“Palmistry, mom?” he asked.

“He has a good palm,” she replied absently. “A rough early youth, yes, but his fate becomes much better later on; health, wealth, love, the whole lot.” She glanced back at Binghe. “Your romantic fate is especially strong and decisive. You know what you want.”

Binghe flushed and chuckled. “I always have,” he agreed, looking Shen Yuan’s way with heat in his eyes.

Shen Yuan dared think that they were done with shopping for the day, but that was overly optimistic of him. It would have been fine if *Binghe’s* wardrobe was the only one that doubled, but Shen Yuan’s husband and mother formed an evil alliance and bullied him into dressing room after dressing room so he was tired and not really thinking when his mother said, apropos of nothing, at the end of their excursion, “Why don’t we have dinner at the house tonight? Your father and brothers haven’t gotten to meet Bing-er yet.”

“Well, one of our brothers,” Mingyu interjected and their mother winced.

“Yes, true,” Bai Huiqing admitted. “I’m sure Jiu-er has had time to calm down.”

“Are you, though?” Mingyu asked, deeply skeptical. “Are you *really?”*

“It will be fine,” Bai Huiqing insisted, somewhat unconvincingly. “Mingyu, you’ll watch them and then nothing will happen. It just takes time and exposure for him to adjust to new people.”

“That’s fine,” Shen Yuan groaned from where he was laying on his own sofa with his head pillowed on Binghe’s thigh. He didn’t care where they ate dinner so long as he got a disco nap ahead of time. There had been, just, *so many* stores. He glanced up at his husband, having momentarily forgotten that one of them was having to wrangle with a System mission. “Is that alright, Binghe?”

Binghe’s posture was almost singing with nervous tension, but he nodded. “Should we bring anything?” he asked.

“Some of those Earl Gray and vanilla custard snowskin mooncakes,” Mingyu answered on Shen Yuan’s behalf. “Or the blackberry lemon ones.”

Binghe turned a look in her direction, “Oh, so I *did* make eight and not six?” he asked blandly. “Meimei was so *sure* I’d miscounted them yesterday.”

“Ahahah.” Mingyu slid guiltily over to hide behind their mother. “On second thought, I’ve just realized I have no idea what other flavors of snow skins you made yesterday.”

“Bring whatever you’d like, dear,” Bai Huiqing chuckled. “I’ve called a car so Mingyu and I can go back first. You boys can follow in an hour or so. Yuan-er looks worn out. Are you still feeling down, dear?”

“I’m getting better,” Shen Yuan promised as he got up to hug them both.

After they left, Binghe let Shen Yuan doze some more and went to go bake away his anxiety. It was difficult to sleep when the house smelled so good, but Shen Yuan felt better when his husband shook him awake a little while later. Shen Yuan’s cultivation, it was worth noting, felt much stronger--although the parasites were far from done with him.

Shen Yuan called a car since it was late and the layered coconut and osmanthus jellies Binghe made to pad out the mooncakes they had left were a little delicate to take on public transit. Binghe enjoyed his first car ride, although the smell of the exhaust got to him after a while and he had to finish out the trip wearing a face mask.

“Your family has such a large house,” Binghe observed when they arrived. “Why do you live on your own?”

“Extended families don’t always live together here,” Shen Yuan explained. “If you’re an adult and can afford it, people expect you to get your own place.”

The house Shen Yuan grew up in was part of a gated community outside the fourth ring road. Like the other houses in the neighborhood, the Shen residence was built in the neo-classic style with very dramatic use of stone columns. The house itself had three stories and was built from white stone. The grounds surrounding it were limited, but immaculately landscaped. Coming back after such a (subjectively) long time, gave Shen Yuan a strange feeling as they approached the door.

This had seemed normal to him once, but he found himself suddenly aware that maybe Airplane-bro was onto something when he called Shen Yuan a ‘filthy fucking Fuerdai.’

“Breathe,” Shen Yuan advised his husband as he rang the doorbell. “It’ll be fine. They’ll love you.”

So, of course, Qi-ge answered the door in a three piece Armani suit that he normally wouldn’t have even worn to New Year’s, whereas Shen Yuan and Binghe were both wearing blue jeans to what was supposed to have been an ‘informal family dinner.’

Chapter End Notes

LBH discovers TikTok.

Soon, probably, TikTok will discover LBH.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[User has 5 Reputation points with Shen Qi!]

[Shen Qi's current attitude towards User: Lukewarm, at Best.]

Yue Qingyuan looked down at Binghe with cool gray eyes and no hint of the affable (albeit empty) smile Binghe was used to seeing on that face.

If Shen Jiu was around, he supposed it only followed that Yue Qingyuan was never far away. Even as a disciple, Binghe had been aware of the odd tension between the Sect Master and his original Shizun. It hadn't been romantic, exactly, but it had colored the air whenever the men had to share the same space and made everyone uncomfortable. That had eased somewhat after Shen Qingqiu's 'qi deviation', when Shen Yuan took over Shen Jiu's life, although not entirely. Those two men had a fate together so strong that it was nearly palpable and here was yet more evidence that *no one* had asked for.

Shen Qi was dressed in what Binghe vaguely recognized as formal attire for this particular society. He certainly looked like one of the pictures Binghe had studied earlier, which would probably have been more intimidating if Binghe had lived in this world for longer than a week. Still, he was conversant enough with the pageantry of this realm to understand that Shen Qi was attempting to subtly put him in his place.

"Da-ge," Shizun greeted his brother. "You look nice. Did you just get back from work? Binghe, this is my oldest brother, Shen Qi. Da-ge, this is Luo Binghe. We brought desserts," Shizun added, in a clear hint for his brother to move so they could go inside.

"Er-di and Meimei mentioned him," Shen Qi agreed, looking Binghe over slowly. "Come in. Mother and Meimei are in the kitchen. Er-di is on his way. We'll be waiting on him before we start."

Binghe had gotten spoiled by his easy welcome with the women, but he schooled his expression and told himself to be patient. The System's reputation metric was probably a red herring meant to distract him from his actual goals. He didn't need to be loved by everyone, despite what he personally wanted.

He had a sense, from the conversations that he'd overheard earlier, that the elder Shen brothers were very close. Binghe probably wouldn't be able to win Shen Qi over until he got Shen Jiu to warm up a little.

Madame Bai and Meimei were indeed in the kitchen, along with a tall man with sleepy brown eyes and graying hair that was just long enough to pull back into a short tail. Some shorter bits fell into his face to frame his sharp cheekbones and strong jaw. Despite his harsh features, though, the man didn't have a whole lot of presence and what he did have felt very placid to Binghe. He turned, smiling vaguely, as they entered --and smacked right into a decorative wall fixture. The man corrected his course, rubbing at the sore spot, and came over to greet them.

“Dad!” Shizun went over to exchange back pats with the man Binghe presumed was Shen Zhan. “Come over and meet Binghe?”

What had the wiki said about Shen Zhan? Something about crouching idiots, wasn’t it? It was a twist on an idiom that Binghe was familiar with, but he didn’t quite understand the meaning behind the parody. Binghe didn’t have time to focus on it, though, because Shen Zhan held his hand out for a shake. This was another local custom that Binghe found a little odd just because touching strangers seemed alien to him.

“Ah, Yuan-er’s young man,” Shen Zhan said as he gave Binghe a shallow once-overm still smiling his benign smile. “What do you have there?”

“Are those the mooncakes?” Mingyu asked, ducking around her father.

“Yes and some jellies,” Binghe chuckled as he handed the little cardboard box Shizun had found for them to carry Binghe’s offerings in. He focused again on the Shen patriarch. “I’m pleased to meet you, sir. My name is Luo Binghe.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Madame Bai called from the other side of the kitchen. “Yuan-er, the power blipped earlier today and I forgot how to reset the screen on the refrigerator. Come fix it for me?” She looked to her husband, “Darling, why don’t you show Bing-er the house while we deal with this?”

“Coming, mom,” Shizun said as he squeezed Binghe’s arm in a silent reassurance that Binghe wouldn’t be left alone for long.

The Shen residence was as impressive on the inside as it was outside. The design aesthetic was unfamiliar, but Binghe didn’t have to understand the intricate details to understand that everything here was painfully expensive and intended to be a conspicuous show of wealth. No wonder Shizun never batted an eye at the most precious silks or brocades Binghe’s vassals paraded before them. He’d already seen its equal or better hanging in carefully composed swags on the walls of his home while growing up.

Shen Zhan gave him a brief glimpse of Shizun’s childhood bedroom, which was equal in size to the entire house on Qing Jing Peak. Binghe didn’t see the posters Mingyu had mentioned, but Shen Zhan mentioned that the room was redecorated after Shizun moved away so there was likely little evidence left of the young man Binghe’s husband had once been.

(Binghe thought, sometimes, about the way he’d felt when he first came back to that house to find his old room completely untouched, his sword gently interred in the tranquil forest shrouding what had once been their shared home, and the kitchen exactly as he’d left it right down to the spices left untouched in their jars. Shizun made Binghe cry plenty in those bad days, but walking into the empty space he’d left behind and finding it waiting for him just as he’d left it even after Shizun doubted, rejected, and then inexplicably died for him had arguably been the worst time. How could someone who clearly loved him and missed him so much do what Shizun had done? Well, at least Binghe finally had his answer on that score.)

“The study is over this way,” Shen Zhan explained as he continued the tour, oblivious to the way Binghe had sunk down into his thoughts. “This is a quieter area of the house, but there’s a good view from the windows there. I’ll show you.”

Binghe followed obediently because he still didn't have any sense of who Shen Zhan was as a person. Madame Bai was unapologetically herself with nothing disguised or held back, but her husband seemed more like the glassy surface of a still pond and Binghe wasn't sure yet just how deep those waters ran.

The study was in an out-of-the way corner of the third floor. In fact, it seemed to take up the majority of that level. Binghe would have classified the space as a library, even. There were shelves upon freestanding shelves of books, some of which looked ancient and precious even to Binghe's jaded gaze. What free floor space there was had been dedicated to an expanse of unbroken slate flooring that you had to cross to get to the wall of picture windows that overlooked the peaceful fairy light landscape of the city at night.

For the record, Binghe had been well aware the whole time that his in-laws had just neatly separated him from Shizun, lured him into a quiet corner of the house where no one was likely to hear him call for help, and Shen Zhan was in the process of leading him across a flat surface that practically *anything* could have been drawn on before Binghe arrived. He'd been studiously ignoring his instincts the whole while because this was his father-in-law and whatever he wanted to do to Binghe was just going to have to happen--so it didn't exactly come as a *surprise* as the floor lit up under Binghe's feet in a network of blue-white lines that came together to make an unfamiliar array with Binghe caught inside.

Binghe wasn't *surprised,* but he *was* a little disappointed, maybe. The ideograms he could identify were ones he recognized from trap arrays and containment circles for demons, so Shen Zhan, at least, knew what Binghe was. Given the fact that Madame Bai and Mingyu were the only ones Binghe'd spent any time with aside from his brief encounter with Shen Jiu, that meant either Binghe's mother-in-law or sister-in-law had identified him.

Shizun had said there were no cultivators in this world and they didn't lie to each other if they could help it. Binghe believed in his heart that Shizun had been telling him the truth as he knew it, so that meant there were two members of Shizun's family at minimum who had been keeping an *enormous* secret from their children and Binghe didn't see any way to get out of this scenario without lying to Shizun or damaging his relationship with his parents.

"So," Shen Zhan said as he removed his glasses and pinned Binghe with a look that was much colder and far more present than any face he'd shown Binghe thus far. "What's a demon such as yourself doing sniffing around my youngest son?"

So, naturally, the System chose that moment to chime in.

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

[Side Quest: ⌈Uncover the Secret Transmigrator Plotline⌋ is 40% complete. Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

[User has -10 Reputation points with Shen Zhan!]

[Shen Qi's current attitude towards User: Suspicious and Hostile.]

Binghe clenched his jaw to hold his reaction inside. That was a big delivery of information, not the least of which was the fact that Shizun wasn't the only transmigrator in this world. If identifying Shizun was 20% of the progress and Shen Zhan was 40% then there were three more secret transmigrators that Binghe needed to identify to get to 100%.

Shen Zhan didn't know it yet, but he'd just given Binghe a clue he'd been in desperate need of.

"Not going to answer?" Shen Zhan asked. He idly polished the lense of his glasses with the hem of his shirt before sliding them back on.

Seeing him like this, Binghe was uncomfortably reminded of what Shizun looked like when he was pissed off. If Madame Bai was the face that Shen Yuan showed to his friends and allies, then Shan Zhan was the parent he channeled when he met an enemy.

[Notice: Understanding of Shen Yuan is now at 80%! Please sincerely continue your efforts!]

Binghe flicked a hand at the floating screen to make it go away, but otherwise did not take his gaze away from Shen Zhan. Surprisingly, Shen Zhan's eyes tracked the motion and his thin brows lifted a fraction of a cun.

"You're being visited by the System?" he asked. Some of the tense readiness leaked out of his posture. Interesting.

"You saw me interact with it?" Binghe asked, rather than answer the obvious.

"No one notices when you speak directly to it," Shen Zhan replied. He began to circle the array as he examined Binghe with rather more interest than during their first encounter. "Gestures and vague statements will get through sometimes if they're open to interpretation. I haven't heard from the System in years. I thought it had moved on from here. "

Binghe split his attention between watching his father-in-law circle the array and surreptitiously looking over the array itself. He recognized some of the ideograms. They weren't ones that were in common use back home, but Binghe saw them in historical records sometimes for use in traps and containment circles for demons. Arrays were only as strong as the least precise statement in the spell language and these ideograms were considered somewhat vague so they'd fallen out of common use. Shizun taught them for historical interest and because they showed up frequently in ruins or the occasional artificial pocket world left behind by an ascended cultivator. This was the first time, however, that Binghe had seen one in use by a living practitioner.

He tested his bonds with a subtle flex of his qi and found there was a lot of 'give' in his restraints. For one, the array was designed to hold a common variety demon. It was not meant to try and contain a higher level demon such as Mobei Jun, much less a Heavenly demon. For another, Binghe's mixed heritage meant that the array was having trouble 'grabbing' onto him since he didn't quite fit the definition of what it was meant to catch and hold. Even just that light press of Binghe's qi was enough to make the energies surrounding him start to destabilize. There was a good chance that the array would shatter if Binghe so much as sneezed right now so he held as still as he could.

If Shen Zhan felt like he had the upper hand then Binghe had a chance to convince him that he wasn't --whatever Shen Zhan thought he was, and wasn't going to do whatever Shen Zhan thought Binghe'd come here for. This situation wasn't unsalvageable just yet.

Just then, the study door opened and Madame Bai stuck her head in.

"Dear, are you…" she stopped as she took in the tableau before her; Binghe trapped in a glowing white circle as her husband prowled around its perimeter. Shen Zhan's vague smile from earlier

snapped into place like a mask, but it was too late. Madame Bai stepped inside quickly, shut the door behind her, and hissed, "...Zhan!" in a tone that made even Binghe stand up straight.

"Darling," Shen Zhan made an attempt to mollify his wife. "Don't let the children hear. The muffling talismans are keyed to the center of the slate tile."

Madame Bai waved off his attempt to stroke up and down her arms. "This is not what I agreed to! You said you were only going to test him."

"I did!" Shen Zhan insisted. "He failed. The boy's a demon so I'm questioning him."

"While our children are downstairs and could come in at any moment?" Madame Bai asked frostily. "You promised me you wouldn't act rashly. This is rash!"

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

Binghe closed his eyes. Oh no.

[Achievement Unlocked: This Whole Damn Time]

[User has been rewarded 200 C-Points! Your total is now 710 C-Points.]

[Checkpoint! Side Quest: ⌈Uncover the Secret Transmigrator Plotline⌋ is 60% complete. Reward issued: One (1) Permanent Visa.]

[Permanent Visa has been added to User Inventory. You now have one (1) Permanent Visa in your inventory and one (1) guest pass. The minimum requirements for Mission Success have been met! Travel restrictions on Xin Mo (reforged) have been lifted! Both Intra and Inter-dimensional travel is available to User. Mission will continue until User exits this plane of reality. Intra-dimensional travel will not end your Mission Progress. Try for a perfect playthrough and unlock further achievements!]

Binghe was instantly suspicious. That had been *too* easy. The winning conditions had just all but fallen into his lap and he didn't trust it. There was something he was missing, some hidden loss he'd take by grabbing Shizun and leaving right here and now. Unfortunately he didn't have time to think about what that could be because the study door was opening and it became clear to all that Shizun had chosen this exact moment to come looking for his wayward spouse.

"Dad, are you done up here yet?" he asked as he let himself in. "Mingyu is getting ready to die if we don't feed her… soon…"

Shizun's dark eyes flew wide as he, much like Madame Bai had moments before, processed the scene before him; his husband trapped in a containment array that shouldn't exist in this world and his parents were the obvious culprits.

Binghe took in the stricken expressions on the faces of his in-laws, Madame Bai in particular, and knew he was going to have to at least try and mitigate the rising disaster for his mother-in-law's sake if nothing else.

"Shizun!" he called out to his husband, "This is *exactly* what it looks like!"

Shen Yuan gawped at his husband. Even his parents turned startled looks on Binghe, who frowned down at himself and then at the array he was stuck inside of. It was a big, unwieldy beast or a spell and if Shen Yuan had ever caught any of his disciples using such awkward spellwork then they'd find themselves running laps for the rest of known time.

"Oh!" Binghe looked up at him, almost glowing with the first flush of discovery. "There's a truth compulsion element in the array! That's why it's doing such a bad job of restraining me!"

"Yes, Binghe," Shen Yuan replied, strained. "I can see that."

Shen Yuan's husband probably hadn't even noticed the other magic working on him before now. Binghe's unique heritage made it nearly impossible to force him to do anything he didn't want to do. Compulsion and mental control techniques were largely useless against him unless he was a willing participant. He, as a general rule, didn't want to hold anything back from Shen Yuan--so sometimes they wound up in situations like this where Binghe went from being in total control of himself to an embarrassing mess the second he clapped eyes on Shen Yuan and the compulsion he hadn't realized he was under suddenly started working.

"Yuan-er, I need you to stay away from the barrier," Shen Zhan said as he interposed himself between Shen Yuan and Binghe. "I know this is very confusing, but…"

Shen Yuan interrupted his father for perhaps the first time in his adult life. "How long has this been going on?" he asked. His voice was low and rough with emotions that not ever he could quite parse.

"Yuan-er, now isn't the time," Shen Zhan chided him, dropping his usual friendly and vague facade. Shen Yuan could count on one hand the number of times in his life that he'd heard his father take that tone with someone and normally he would care, but…

"This is exactly the time," Shen Yuan could feel his own body language start to revert back to Peak Lord Shen Qingqiu. His shoulders drew up and back. He folded one arm behind his back and made a tense fist there. His free hand longed for a fan. "Or has someone else invited my partner to their house under false pretenses? Has someone *else* been lying to my face about whether or not cultivation is real?"

Shen Zhan didn't quite wilt, but Shen Yuan knew he'd scored a solid hit when his father's shoulders dropped. "It's a long story," he admitted. "Your mother and I are a bit older than we appear. We can tell you the whole story later, but this young man is…"

"...my *husband,"* Shen Yuan snapped, losing patience all at once. "He's my husband!"

"...a demon!" Shen Zhan finished at the same time. "He's not from this…" He stopped abruptly and reared back as Shen Yuan's declaration sank in. "...your *what?"*

"Yuan-er!" Bai Huiqing gasped. "You got married without us?"

"He's a half demon," Shen Yuan continued, too angry to address that last bit. "Which I *already knew* and could have explained if you'd asked instead of luring him into a trap!" He tried to duck around his father, but Shen Zhan blocked him.

"What do you mean 'husband'?" Shen Zhan insisted. "You're barely twenty one! You haven't even dated anyone seriously. Do you hear yourself?"

A muscle jumped in Shen Yuan's clenched jaw. "It looks like we've all been hiding things from each other," he replied shortly and met Binghe's gaze over his father's shoulder. His heart was pounding in his chest.

Shen Yuan had loved Xianxia stories his entire life.

He'd never been so delusional that he thought there was a possibility they could have any basis in reality, but a significant proportion of his reasons for that was because he'd asked his father about it once when he was a little kid and was just getting into reading as his primary hobby. It was during that delicate age where children are just learning to discern fact from fiction when he'd turned to his father -arguably the parent he identified with most- and asked, 'Do you think Cultivation could be real?'

'No, son,' Shen Zhan had said, even looking him straight in the eye. 'Those are just stories.'

The study had never been off limits to Shen Yuan or any of his siblings, but they generally stayed out of there because their father liked to talk about his current research projects and had a knack for making just about anything boring enough to make you cry.

Looking at the study now, with the eyes of an adult and master cultivator, he could see the tools of his father's --no, his parents' craft. There was mulberry paper by the printer stacked next to the copier paper. There were little red pots of cinnabar ink that Shen Yuan had always assumed were for his parents' seals on the writing desk there with traditional brushes hanging on a rack nearby. The slate floor inset, wasn't that basically a giant chalkboard on the floor just like the workrooms at Qing Jing? Even the swords hanging on the walls pulsed with quiescent spiritual energy now that he had the ability to sense it.

They'd hidden their spiritual arts in plain sight by making it *boring* and then lied to their children about it.

Shen Yuan's emotions were surging in his chest with such intensity that he hardly knew which way was up. His parents had lied to him *about a fundamental aspect of reality* and --and he could have died without ever knowing.

He *did* die without knowing and ended up reincarnated in another world where Cultivation was almost commonplace, totally unprepared for any of it.

"Binghe," Shen Yuan hardly recognized his voice. Binghe didn't seem to either because he came to the kind of sudden, intense attention that usually presaged an intense bout of violence back home. "Come out now. I want to go home. Take me home, please."

If Shen Yuan's parents meant to say anything, it got lost when Binghe deliberately rolled his shoulders and the array shattered around him in an explosion of sparks. The 'disguise' he'd been wearing these past few days in order to pass as human dissolved as he strode off the slate inset with his demonic huadian and red eyes both blazing in the low light of the study.

A shining silver blade that had hung on the wall in Shen Zhan's study for as long as Shen Yuan could remember vanished from its decorative sheathe and reappeared in Shen Zhan's hand. At the same time, Binghe summoned Xin Mo. It didn't have the malevolent presence that Shen Yuan remembered of the original, but it retained its most useful power. Binghe cut a portal into the air behind himself and for a moment, Shen Yuan had the odd experience of looking at the back of his own head as Binghe used the portal to get to Shen Yuan's side.

A strong arm looped around Shen Yuan's waist as Binghe pulled Shen Yuan into his side. The first portal closed and Binghe cut open another that led right into their living room back at the apartment. The second portal shut before either of his parents could reach it, leaving Binghe and Shen Yuan alone in the safety of the apartment.

Shen Yuan took a heaving breath and Binghe crushed him into a grounding hug. "They!" Shen Yuan wheezed. "This entire time!"

"I'm sorry," Binghe whispered into his ear. He held on as Shen Yuan's body attempted to shake itself apart.

He'd thought that a fundamental rule in their family was that they didn't lie to each other. They may not tell each other everything, but they didn't tell one another blatant falsehoods --except, apparently, they did.

Chapter End Notes

I picture Shen Zhan as sort of the unholy combination of Kenshin Himura and Vash the Stampede, under the thin veneer of an absent minded scholar who keeps edibles hidden on him at all times.

What I'm saying is that his capacity for poor decision making when unsupervised is both glorious and explosive. The line between genius and madness is so thin that he's on both sides of the line.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shizun didn't talk much after Binghe extracted them from his parents' house. He vanished somewhere inside his head and if it wasn't for the way he clung to Binghe as tightly as Binghe was holding onto him then Binghe might have thought Shizun had reverted to his old habits of shutting everyone and everything out when he was scared.

Eventually, Binghe moved them to the sofa where he divested his husband of the most constricting parts of his clothing. It had become clear that this emotional storm was here for the duration and there was nothing to do except wait it out so, although Binghe couldn't soothe his husband's raw feelings just yet, he could at least see to Shizun's physical comfort.

A hopeful sign arrived when Shizun migrated from Binghe's side to his lap of his own volition rather than slumping against Binghe like a marionette with its strings cut. He put his arms around Binghe's neck and shoved his face into the hollow of Binghe's neck, more grumpy now than gutted. Binghe continued to hold his spouse until Shizun finally stirred himself to say, "Your phone has been going off."

Having had the device for less than a day, Binghe had largely disregarded the occasional dings and chirps it made. Shizun was correct in that it had been chirping at him on and off for the last hour or so, but Binghe's priority would always be his husband so he'd been ignoring it. Seeing as Shizun was feeling well enough to comment on it, Binghe hitched up his hip to get the device out of his back pocket.

There were messages waiting for him, most from Madame Bai but also some from Mingyu.

Mdm Bai: I'm very sorry about what happened. Are you and Yuan-er somewhere safe?

Mdm Bai: My husband meant to follow you both to Yuan-er's house. I've stopped him for now.

Mdm Bai: I understand if you are not willing to speak with me just now, but I hope you will feel comfortable enough to let me know soon that you are both alright.

Meimei: WTF happened upstairs?

Meimei: Mom isn't talking to dad, but neither of them will say what happened

Meimei: Where are you? Did you get out of the house somehow?

Mdm Bai: I'm getting worried. Yuan-er isn't responding either.

Mdm Bai: A-Zhan may go over there soon if I don't hear from either of you.

Mdm Bai: He's very sorry for what happened. He worries about Yuan-er the most and that frequently clouds his judgement.

Mdm Bai: A-Zhan tells me you're being visited by the System. Please be careful. Its influence is wider and more pervasive than you can imagine. Its strange games can change on a whim and it is

capable of a terrible sort of patience.

Binghe didn't quite realize that Shizun was reading the screen until he heard a strangled little, "Are you kidding me?" from somewhere underneath his chin.

"Yuefu saw me wave the System away from my face," Binghe confirmed unhappily. "He seemed familiar with it. I…" Binghe paused, trying to find a way to share what he'd learned without possibly triggering a penalty from the System. He'd been warned twice now that it would change the rules of its game whenever it liked. "...think he and Madame Bai are like you, Shizun."

Shizun scrubbed his face with both hands. "I can't," he rasped. "Say something to her so they don't come over. I don't want to see them right now."

Binghe wasn't a very fast typer yet, but he at least had gotten passably familiar with using the little keyboard.

LBH: A-Yuan is well, but very upset at present. He doesn't want visitors.

LBH: I understand that Shen Zhan was acting out of caution in the study.

LBH: I *have* met other demons.

Mdm Bai: I'll hold A-Zhan back.

Mdm Bai: He could stand to stay in trouble for a little while.

The little dots at the bottom of the conversation that indicated when the other conversant was writing pulse for a while and then.

Mdm Bai: How long have you and A-Yuan been married?

Binghe stared at the screen, unsure of how to answer. Shizun stroked his arm, reminding him that he wasn't totally alone in this quandary.

"You can tell her," Shizun said, still sounding listless. "Might as well rip the bandage off."

Binghe wasn't sure he wanted to have this conversation via text, but at the same time he was absolutely sure that Shizun needed physical distance from his parents right now and probably would for the foreseeable future.

LBH: It's a very long and complicated story. I'm not from this world. The System sent A-Yuan to my world for a time and that is where we became close.

That was an understatement, but Binghe didn't want Madame Bai to have to learn that her son narrowly escaped death second hand, via text. Even he knew that was inappropriate to deliver news of that magnitude.

LBH: We have been married for nearly five years. The System returned him here without warning. I found a way to follow him, but there's a cost I need to pay.

LBH: A-Yuan has also warned me about the System. He was my Peak Lord long before he became my husband and I am obedient to his guidance. I am being as cautious as I can be.

The dots underneath Madame Bai's name pulse for a long time until finally the screen lit up with the words 'incoming call.'

Madame Bai didn't waste words and said to him without hesitation, "Bing-er, I'm very sorry, but please hand the phone to my son."

Shizun held his hand out and accepted the phone from Binghe, "Hi, mom," he greeted her, still tired but starting to sound like himself again. "Yeah, I guess we *do* have a lot to talk about."

Binghe eavesdropped on the conversation without shame or hesitation in the hopes that he could shake some more percentage points out of the System, but Madame Bai was mostly focused on what had happened to her son and Binghe knew most of that story already. Not to mention, the version Shizun told her was *highly* sanitized. He left out any mention of his multiple deaths or the full details of the events at Maigdu Ridge.

"Binghe is a half demon," Shizun explained once the conversation started to turn towards Binghe's qualifications as a husband once more. "He was raised as a righteous cultivator. He didn't even know what he was until another demon told him. There was a cradle seal on his demonic heritage so he didn't come to demonic cultivation until later in life."

"I suppose that's why your father's array didn't work on him," Madame Bai sighed. "He's pretending he isn't upset about that, but you know how he can be."

"Well no one has used those formulas for over two centuries for a *reason,* mom," Shizun replied, not unkindly, but there was still a long silence from the other end of the conversation.

"Yuan-er," Madame Bai finally replied, "Your father's arrays were cutting edge when we were taken away from our home."

It turned out that when Shen Zhan had said they were older than they appeared to be, he hadn't been exaggerating. Madame Bai and her husband had been cultivation partners pushing at the gates of immortality in a world that sounded suspiciously like Binghe's own, just in the far distant past, when they attempted to raid the abandoned pocket realm of an ascended immortal that only opened every five hundred years or so. Instead, the portal they entered dropped them in an entirely different world with no way home.

"I knew something had gone wrong when a voice started talking to us in our heads," Madame Bai explained. "We were tasked with fighting a group of monsters that had crossed over into this world during the same interdimensional disaster that sent us here. It never mentioned the possibility that we might be able to go home, but by the time we managed to eliminate the last of the monster incursions we already had you boys and I was pregnant with Mingyu. The System promised us wealth, the large family we'd been wanting, and perpetual safety if we went along with its game. The best I can say of it is that it's kept its promises regarding the rewards."

Shizun made a grumpy noise of agreement, which at least boded well for Binghe. It also explained why he had been given the possibility of multiple guest passes. According to the System's rules, if Binghe got his hands on both visas and both passes then he and Shizun would be able to take on a 'passenger' when they travelled between worlds.

The hidden transmigrators in this world were all stranded here and, knowing that, Binghe now had no choice but to continue the game--just as the System had no doubt intended.

Shen Yuan's conversation with his mother lasted for hours, but got easier as they gained some distance from the big revelations of the evening. Shen Yuan had never been able to stay angry at his parents and it was --nice to be able to talk to his mother and father about his spiritual arts. His dad hadn't participated in the conversation right away, but he lurked in the background just like Binghe did until he couldn't stand it anymore and started asking questions over his wife's shoulder.

"We didn't keep it from you to be cruel, Yuan-er," his mom explained at long last. "We didn't tell Jiu-er or Qi-er either. You're all native to this world and were born without spirit veins. We debated it for a long time, but ultimately decided that it would be crueler to show you a world you'd never dreamed of and then tell you that you could never be a part of it."

"Mom," Shen Yuan said as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Learning that half of my family is part of a secret club and I wasn't invited isn't much better."

"I see that now," she agreed. "Your father and I are truly sorry, darling."

"What about Mingyu?" he asked because he liked pain. "Was she born able to cultivate?"

"Yes." There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Please don't hold it against her. She didn't agree with our decision and we've argued about it several times in the past. I think she'll be very happy to be able to share everything with you now. You two were always the closest to one another."

'My Meimei is a cultivator,' Shen Yuan thought to himself. She wasn't a scholarly Qing Jing type. If she showed up to a disciple selection then Liu Qingge and Qi Qingqi would probably get into a fight to the death over her. "I--," he broke off as the front door erupted in thunderous knocking.

"It's Meimei," Binghe reported when he checked the security feed. "Someone must have let her into the building."

"Let her in," Shen Yuan said. "Mom, I need to go. Meimei is here."

"When did she…" Mom cut herself off. "...yes, go talk to her, dear. We can talk more in the morning. I'd like to try family dinner again if you boys are amenable."

"I'll talk to Binghe and we'll think about it," Shen Yuan replied. He wasn't willing to make the decision right away. Binghe would probably happily deliver himself to Dad for more abuse without a second thought, but Shen Yuan needed time to figure out how mad he was at the situation and how mad he was at his father for putting Shen Yuan's husband *into an interrogation circle.*

"What the fuck is going on!?" Mingyu demanded as soon as Binghe opened the door for her. "What happened to…" she trailed off, blinking up at Binghe who -come to think about it- hadn't put his human face back together after they left Dad's study. "Why is your face glowing?"

"This isn't a conversation for the entire hallway to hear, Meimei," Shen Yuan said as he got up to meet her at the door.

"Yeah, no shit," she muttered and moved so Binghe could close the door. "What did Dad do? All I could get out of Mom is that he fucked up somehow then they shut themselves up in the study and wouldn't come out. I didn't even see you leave. Did you two jump out a window or something?"

“Binghe brought us home and mom called a little while later so we could talk it out,” Shen Yuan explained. “Dad --noticed something about Binghe, lured him away from the rest of us, and trapped him in an array to question him. He didn’t talk to Mom before he did it.”

“Makes sense, Mom is most of his common sense,” Mingyu glanced up at Binghe with narrow eyes. “What is…” she made a vague gesture at her own forehead, “...all that.”

“I’m half Heavenly Demon,” Binghe said and tried to soften it with a smile. “Forgive me for keeping it from you. I didn’t think there were cultivators in this world aside from A-Yuan and myself.”

“Aside from…” she trailed off and slowly, very slowly turned her wide-eyed gaze on Shen Yuan. “...Ge?” she asked, in a small voice.

“It’s a long story, Meimei. I can’t do anything interesting to prove it right now, but...” Shen Yuan held out his wrist to her. “Mom implied that you’d know how to check for yourself.”

She snatched his arm and pressed her fingers against his pulse. Then tears started to fill her eyes and the instincts he’d developed after fifteen years of being Luo Binghe’s Peak Lord and then later his husband let him catch her when she threw herself at him for a hug.

“You’re like me!” Mingyu squeezed him tight enough to raise bruises, but he hardly cared. “I can finally *talk* to somebody who isn’t Mom or Dad!” She pulled back after a moment to wipe her eyes and ask, “What’s this long story?”

So, Shen Yuan had to go through it all again. Unfortunately for him, Mingyu had a better sense for when he was editing and caught him out on his biggest omission almost right off.

“So why did this System thing pick you?” she asked in a tone like she could already guess. Maybe she could. They were both literature nerds. She was just as familiar with the Isekai genre as he was. There was pretty much only one way transmigrators landed in a new body and she knew enough to be suspicious. “Why didn’t it just move your whole body like it did Mom and Dad?”

Shen Yuan exchanged a glance with Binghe, who was in the process of making them tea. Binghe nodded at him encouragingly.

“Look, you *cannot ever* tell our parents or Da-ge and Jiu-ge…” Shen Yuan told her. “...but I died. It happened the night before Jiu-ge was blowing up my phone earlier this week.”

Mingyu went very, very still. “How?” she asked in a flat voice that promised violence. Again, she knew him well enough to have a pretty good guess about how he might die alone in his apartment. He’d gotten pretty sick a few times since he’d moved out and Mingyu had been the one to find him both times.

“I gave myself food poison--NO!” He lunged just in time to tackle her to the floor as she started for the door. “Mingyu, no! Binghe, block the door!”

Binghe jumped up and did so, but not without a look that promised Shen Yuan that he’d be looking for answers later.

“I’m not going to kill him, I’m just going to find him and break his legs!” she snarled. “That quack finally managed to kill you! I said it was going to happen and nobody believed me! Even you said

it was no big deal!"

"Mingyu, I'm fine!" Shen Yuan managed to wrestle her back onto the couch.

"Yeah, *now!"* she retorted, but let him sit her back down. "Through a *miracle!* At the very least that doctor shouldn't be allowed to practice anymore. If you won't let me hurt him then you have to let Qi-ge sue him for malpractice. Those are your options now."

"What's going on?" Binghe asked. His smooth brow was creased with building tension. If Shen Yuan wasn't careful then Mingyu wasn't the only one he'd need to talk down from some cathartic violence. "Meimei? What happened?"

"Yuan-ge's selective food blindness is what happened," Mingyu spat. "Mom and Dad hired this pediatric occupational therapist when he was a kid to try and get him to be able to eat more things. He used hypnosis and cognitive training to condition Yuan-ge into not looking at or smelling anything he ate so he wouldn't be 'picky' anymore. It sounds good on paper, but now he can't always tell what's safe to eat and he's made himself really sick before. There's a reason we're always coming over to check his fridge and pantry, but if we all get busy at the same time then…" she looked sharply away.

"Mingyu, I…" Shen Yuan shook his head and changed his mind about what he'd been about to say. "...you were right. I'm sorry for dismissing your worries. Will you forgive me?"

She sniffed. "I'm not mad at *you..."* she grumbled and allowed herself to be hugged. "...but if you really feel bad then let Qi-ge go ahead with the lawsuit."

"If I can then I will," Shen Yuan sighed, giving into the legal circus that he'd been trying to avoid for years. Qi-ge's lawyers were notorious for leaving behind nothing but bones when he let them off their leashes. Poor old Doctor Hong was on his own from now on. "I don't know what the future looks like and you absolutely can't ask Binghe questions. You don't know what *it* will deduct points for."

"Alright, I won't risk offending Skynet," she sighed and looked at Binghe. "I want to hear more about these blood parasites later, though, Ge."

"I get to be 'Ge' now too?" Binghe asked, unable to hide the way it made him smile.

"Well, apparently you've been around for five years," she sighed. "I'm mad that I didn't get to go to the wedding."

"No one was invited," Binghe said. "Cultivators don't generally have ceremonies in my world when they take a partner. Shizun was just indulging me when I asked for a wedding."

"I wasn't indulging anybody," Shen Yuan said, feeling his face go hot. He tried to cover it with his hand, but was only middlingly successful. Why weren't fans more common here? His face was even thinner here where he didn't have Shen Qingqiu's resting bitch expression to hide behind. "I said yes because I wanted to be married too, not just to make you happy."

"Really?" Binghe's expression went soft enough that Shen Yuan was hesitantly confident that his husband wouldn't wait for him to fall asleep in order to go on a murder errand with Mingyu tonight.

They were interrupted when Mingyu's phone alarm went off, telling her it was getting close to curfew at her dormitory.

"I have to go," she sighed. "They're doing bed checks more often now, thanks to Lingjiao, to make sure nobody has boys over. I'm coming back tomorrow after class and we're talking more. Don't think you're getting out of it, *either* of you."

Binghe sent her off with some leftover desserts that hadn't made the cut to be served at dinner since she apparently didn't get to eat any of the ones they'd brought.

It was late, but neither Shen Yuan nor Binghe seemed quite able to settle and they ended up on the couch both trying to read until they'd calmed down. Shen Yuan loaded his ebook library onto Binghe's new ipad and thought that was sufficient until Binghe asked Shen Yuan to log him back onto Zhongdian.

"Binghe, no," Shen Yuan groaned. Hadn't they been through enough punishment for the night?

"I want to read the rest," Binghe replied stubbornly. "Shizun said that Shen Qingqiu doesn't appear again after the Sect Master dies. I'm past that part now. I want to see the rest."

Shen Yuan sighed, but gave in. It would be nice to have someone to grumble about Airplane's terrible plot devices with if nothing else. "Alright, but same rules as before."

"Oh no, reading a dirty book with my husband in my lap," Binghe replied blandly. "However shall I manage?"

"Somehow, I'm sure," Shen Yuan replied primly and logged him in.

Shen Yuan's emotions were still a scramble, but apparently that meant nothing to the blood parasites. As before, he nodded off after an embarrassingly short while, tucked between his husband's side and the padded backrest of the sofa.

Binghe shook him awake some indeterminate amount of time later. Shen Yuan blinked groggily at the wall clock and found that it was after midnight. "Time for bed?" he asked.

"Just about," Binghe agreed. "I have a question, though. I've finished the novel and most of the extras, but there's one I don't understand. Will Shizun explain it to me?"

He held up the screen for Shen Yuan to read and all at once, any potential for getting back to sleep evacuated Shen Yuan's body.

The 'extra' chapter Binghe had been reading was one page that contained a single line of text:

'If you're reading this, Bro, answer your fucking DMs.'

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

[Achievement Unlocked: Meet Your Maker]

[User has been rewarded 500 C-Points! Your total is now 1210 C-Points.]

[Checkpoint! Side Quest: ⌈Uncover the Secret Transmigrator Plotline⌋ is 80% complete. Continue to work hard and uncover hidden material!]

[Checkpoint! Side Quest: ⌈Flesh Out the Character Wiki⌋ is 90% complete. Continue to work hard and uncover secret material!]

The System piped up the second the apartment door opened after they'd arrived at a far shabbier address than Shizun's. The scent of burnt hair and other unfamiliar scents assaulted Binghe's nose, but weren't enough to distract him from the fact that the man in front of them was a shorter, less attractive, rounder version of his least favorite martial uncle (just after Liu-shishi and the sect master.)

"BRO!" Shang Qinghua wailed and threw himself into Shizun's arms --or would have if Binghe hadn't caught him by the scruff before he could. His expression went through an entire gamut of emotions, as it usually did when he was unexpectedly confronted with Binghe's presence. The emotions were all some variation on fear, which Binghe didn't mind at all usually and minded even less now that he knew who was responsible for the Awful Book. "J-junshang! This is --a surprise."

"Yes," Binghe agreed frostily. "I imagine it is. Now move."

Shang Qinghua whimpered, but moved so Binghe could get Shizun inside. They'd walked most of the way and it had taken up a lot of Shizun's still limited stamina. They'd have to return via portal.

Given the enormous singe marks on the wall and the way half of Shang-shishu's hair was standing on end, Binghe was pretty sure he knew how his now least favorite martial uncle had met his end in this life. He was even still moving gingerly so he hadn't had any medical treatment, but still gave up the better of his two chairs for Shizun's use. That bought him back some of Binghe's respect, but not much.

"Bro, don't take this personally, but you look like shit," Shang Qinghua said, like he didn't look like pan fried death himself. "It's like you're back on Without a Cure."

"I'm better than I look," Shizun said, waving off his shidi's concern. "What I want to know is how you got back here? I thought the System gave you a chance to return and you didn't take it."

"Oh?" Binghe glanced at Shang-shishu for an explanation, but Shizun replied instead.

"It was that time he came out to our retreat to cry at me about noodles and pretend he wasn't upset about Mobei Jun."

Ah, yes. That time. It was good to know that there'd been an external factor fuelling that elaborate meltdown. Binghe had almost considered becoming concerned for his lieutenant's primary emotional support minion.

"Bro, I have no idea," Shang-shishu groaned, scrubbing his face. "For all I know, my cooling corpse is still laying on the floor in my office. I was at An Ding when the lights went out. They'll put me in the crypt, at least. If one of my King's subordinates found me, they'd probably put me aside to cure for a midnight snack later."

Not if they wanted to live out the hour, but Shang-shishu was remarkably dense about accepting suggestions that his 'King' had feelings about him that weren't strictly that of a master and his lowliest minion. If Mobei-jun had found Shang Qinghua in the same state that Binghe had found

Shizun in, then Cang Qiong Mountain sect was about to realize just how tame and restrained Binghe's own reactions had been during the five long years of his master's absence.

"Your body is likely in a vegetative state, the same as Shizun's was before I left to find his missing soul," Binghe explained tersely. "I left his other body in the care of Mu Qingfang. It's likely that your disciples have found you and brought you to Qian Cao by now."

Shang-shishu hissed, sounding not at all reassured. "I'm going to have some explaining to do…" he groaned, but then snapped his attention back to Binghe. "...but you made it here, Junshang. That means you can go back too, right? Can you take anyone with you??"

Shizun intervened before the System could do more than manifest its floating translucent screen, "No questions," he snapped. "Binghe is dealing with our old friend."

"The System?" Shang-shishu asked and winced. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that, but -uh- hey. This servant has faith in you! The protag… I mean, your skill will carry you through to victory!"

Binghe looked at Shizun. "What was he about to say, Shizun?"

"He was going to say your 'protagonist halo' would carry you through to victory," Shizun sighed, looking tired again at the mere mention of 'Proud Immortal Demon Way.'

Binghe wasn't that far behind him. He'd managed to power through the remainder of the chapters the previous night by starting to skim as soon as it looked like someone was about to take their clothes off. That was many, many hours of his life he would never get back. 'The Humbling of Shen Qingqiu' was arguably where the plot ended. After that, Shang-shishu was very good at writing the first third of an interesting story arc, but it invariably got lost in more and more improbable sexscapades.

"I am *not* your protagonist," Binghe informed his martial uncle in a tone so cold that probably even Mobei Jun might have gotten chilled by it. "That man is a sex-crazed psychopath who tried to screw my husband by pretending to be me. Be glad that I'm here and he's not."

That other Luo Binghe would have been long gone by now. Binghe knew him well enough to know that he'd probably have stuck around long enough to secure interdimensional passage for Shen Yuan since he seemed fascinated enough by Shizun to classify him as a potential wife for his collection, but the other marooned transmigrators (including Shang-shishu himself) would have been left to fend for themselves ages ago.

Shang-shishu blanched. "Y-you… know about...uh… bro? Bro, why would you do this to me?"

"Don't look over here for help," Shizun replied with a scathing look. "These are your terrible chickens come home to roost."

"Has-has he read the *whole…"* Shang-shishu cringed as Shizun nodded. "...bro, *no,* why would you let him do that? This one is still sensitive!"

"He wanted to understand," Shizun said, looking away."He deserved to know."

"I guess," Shang-shishu grumbled and glanced back and forth between them. "So, what was this about another Luo Binghe trying to sleep with Shen-shixiong?"

“I encountered a different version of myself during an excursion several months ago.” Binghe scowled just thinking about it. Having read Airplane-Shooting-Towards-the-Sky’s pornographic drivel, he now understood what he’d seen in that alien world much better. “We briefly exchanged places. He found Shizun in our bedroom and eventually decided to…” he stopped as Shang-shishu held up a hand.

“Yeah, no, I can guess what he tried,” Shang-shishu shook his head. “I kind of wondered how that would go and that’s pretty much what I’d pictured. Sorry, bro. That’s, what, twice now that you had to deal with the original?”

Twice?

“Shizun?” Binghe glanced at his husband and found him scowling at Shang-shishu.

“You *snitch,”* Shizun hissed.

“Did… did you not… Shutting up!” Shang-shiu yelped as Shizun grabbed a nearby cushion (it was long and had pictures of an unusually beautiful man that looked rather similar to Mobei-jun painted on either side. He was fully dressed on one and on the other he was--not) and threw it at Shang-shishu’s head.

“We’re leaving,” Shizun declared. “If we find a way back, I’ll message you.”

“Bro, don’t be like that!” Shang-shishu wailed, following them until Binghe lost patience and summoned Xin Mo. “I didn’t mean to tattle!”

Shizun didn’t look back except to make a gesture over his shoulder (he closed his hand in a fist with only his middle finger raised) as he stepped through Binghe’s portal, back into their own living room.

“Shizun, what did he mean?” Binghe asked as soon as they were alone again.

Shizun glanced in Binghe’s direction and then away again. “I don’t know for sure that it was him and not an illusion created by the System,” he admitted quietly. “It happened when we were at Zhao Hua Temple. I lost all my B-points.”

Binghe felt a chill.

“My penalty was to be returned to my original world where I was already dead,” he continued, still looking away. “By then, the System had started giving me different kinds of points in order to keep my crucial numbers low. I cashed in those other points to transmute my penalty into a different punishment.”

No.

“Shizun, you didn’t…” Binghe shook his head, trying to forget the events at Zhao Hua Temple. He’d been so consumed in his own ballooning emotions that it had been nearly impossible to pay attention to anything except what was going on inside his own head. What *else* had he missed?

“It sent me into a dream where you…” Shizun shook his head. “...where *he* was waiting. It wasn’t as bad as the book, but I was still shaken afterwards.”

‘It wasn’t *as bad as the book.’*

[Checkpoint! Side Quest: ⌈Flesh Out the Character Wiki⌋ is 95% complete. Continue to work hard and uncover secret material!]

Binghe was abruptly done with this entire day. Shizun made a noise as Binghe picked him up, put him over his shoulder, and took them both back to bed.

Even so, his churning thoughts didn't leave him alone. He was at risk of becoming distracted and he hated that the System, who was no doubt behind that little revelation, had almost succeeded in diverting his attention from where it needed to be directed most.

In order of priority, he needed to find the last hidden transmigrator and fill out the last 5% of the character wiki. Everything else could wait.

Fortunately, he'd long had a suspicion about the identity of the last transmigrator and it was well past time to see if his instincts were correct.

Shizun didn't really need the blood parasites to encourage him to sleep, but Binghe gave him a nudge anyway. He didn't need to be around for this part and he deserved to be the one to take it easy this time.

Madame Bai happened to be up and didn't ask him any questions when he texted her for directions. It was his first time taking public transit by himself, but the payment card Shizun had set up for him got Binghe a few city blocks away from Shizun's apartment building to a sleek row of townhouses.

He found the one he was looking for without too much effort. It was the only one in the entire neighborhood with good feng shui in the landscaping. Now that he knew what he was looking for, it was getting easier to spot potential transmigrators. Even Shang-shishu's apartment showed signs of having been recently rearranged.

Binghe got lucky, the man who answered the door for him was none other than his quarry.

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

[Achievement Unlocked: Shifu! Shi-who?]

[User has been rewarded 500 C-Points! Your total is now 1710 C-Points.]

[Checkpoint! Side Quest: ⌈Uncover the Secret Transmigrator Plotline⌋ is 100% complete. Reward issued: One (1) Permanent Visa.]

[User has completed Side Quest 1!]

"Of course it's you," Shen Jiu groused. His entire demeanor spoke of resignation. "I suppose you might as well come inside."

"Thank you, Shizun," Binghe said. It would be the last time he called this man that. There was only one Shizun in Binghe's life and Shen Yuan would occupy that role forever more.

Shen Jiu was older looking in this world, which wasn't hard. There wasn't as much ambient spiritual energy here and he wasn't living on a sacred mountain, nor was he attending especially closely to his cultivation.

Madame Bai was not going to be pleased to hear she had one, possibly two additional cultivators practicing right under her nose. Binghe made a note to find a way to trick Shen Jiu into outing himself so Binghe didn't have to be the one to tell her.

"I'm nobody's Shizun now, boy," Shen Jiu snapped.

"That's for the best," Binghe agreed and ignored the dirty look he got in response.

The inside of the townhouse was much more sterile than Shizun's comfortable, airy, and well lit little set of rooms. Shen Jiu and Shen Qi seemed to prefer black leather and silver metal in their decor. The artificial lights were low and softened the room a bit, but not by much.

Shen Jiu took himself to the most uncomfortable looking couch Binghe had ever seen (granted, there hadn't been many, but Binghe thought this one would still rank even after he'd had more exposure to the types of furniture this world had on offer) and loosened his tie. "So, what do you want? Vengeance? Is fucking my little brother in front of me not vengeance enough?"

"If I'd been fucking him, you'd have known," Binghe replied blandly. "Shen Yuan is my husband and we'll do what we please, when we please."

Shen Jiu actually reared away from him. "Since when?!"

"Since about five years ago." It was petty to enjoy Shen Jiu's discomfort like this, but Binghe had only just recently given himself permission again to resent all those late night beatings and the tacit permission this man had given Binghe's shixiongs to torment him. He thought he was surely allowed this much. "The System transmigrated him into your abandoned body, where he became my Shizun. Eventually, when I was older, we became cultivation partners."

"That is surely glossing over most of it," was Shen Jiu's acidic reply. "Unless you'd have me beleive that Yuan-er is in the habit of fucking his students."

"I was twenty-five before he was even willing to consider me in that way," Binghe allowed, as that was a valid objection and one people weren't usually brave enough to voice to his face. "You may rest assured."

"I am assured of nothing," Shen Jiu snapped. "You still haven't told me what you're doing here."

"I got what I came for as soon as you opened the door," Binghe shrugged one shoulder. "Unless you care to tell me how you came to be here."

Shen Jiu considered him with narrowed eyes. "You're being ridden by the fucking System," he concluded aloud once he was done. "I should have realized as soon as you admitted to knowing what it was."

Binghe allowed himself a nod. His former Shizun seemed more hateful like this, but also in a strange way he felt less dangerous. Binghe remembered him constantly feeling like a pressurized water-skin that was ready to burst into violence at any moment and splash whoever happened to be nearby. Like this, his tongue was sharper but he seemed --happier.

Shizun loved his sect and the sect loved him back, but now Binghe wondered if that had necessarily been true for Shen Jiu.

“It may be helpful to Shen Yuan and myself if you were willing to share your story,” Binghe asked with as much courtesy as he could muster for someone who had once watched him being whipped over a cup of tea. Unfortunately, this was now one of his brothers-in-law so he had to at least pretend to play nice.

“Will it now?” Shen Jiu sneered at him, but ‘Shen Yuan’ seemed to be the magic phrase. “There’s little to tell. I experienced a sudden fever, so bad that I died of it --except I woke in the body of a young boy who had my same name and baby brother. The System gave me a mission to protect the boy until he became an adult. I did so. The end.”

[Congratulations! Congratulations! Congratulations! Important things must be said three times!]

[Achievement Unlocked: These Eyes are All Knowing!]

[User has been rewarded 100 C-Points! Your total is now 1810 C-Points.]

[Checkpoint! Side Quest: ⌈Flesh Out the Character Wiki⌋ is 100% complete. Reward issued: One (1) Guest Pass.]

[User has completed Side Quest 2! Mission complete!]

[Thank you for using the System! The Interdimensional Travel function of Xin Mo (reforged) is now fully unlocked. User may travel at your convenience, under the restrictions previously stated.]

[Uninstalling…]

[Uninstall complete.]

[Goodbye!]

That abbreviated story was leaving out a lot, such as the mysterious circumstances under which the Qiu family house burned down and the ultimate fate of the man who was dumb enough to think laying hands on a child under the protection of a Peak Lord was a good idea, but it was apparently good enough for the System to cash out his final percentage points.

“Thank you,” Binghe said even though words felt like glass in his throat. “In return, I will answer any questions you have.”

“I will be going to A-Yuan with my questions, thank you,” Shen Jiu snipped at him. “Now get out and never call me Shizun ever again or it will be the last thing you do, mongrel.”

The fact that Binghe received no secret messages about how much Shen Jiu either did or did not like him was music to his ears. The silence was golden.

“I would never dare,” Binghe shot back. “Shen Yuan taught me to read, to write, and to cultivate. *He* is my Shizun. You only ever taught me how to take a beating and I already knew how to do that before I came to Cang Qiong Mountain Sect. How could I call a man ‘teacher’ when he only ever covered old material?”

Binghe found himself back on the pavement in short order, but in a far better mood than when he’d arrived.

Shizun was still asleep when Binghe slid back into bed next to him. In the morning they'd have a lot to discuss. Obviously, the first task would be to return Shang-shishu to Mobei Jun's custody. Afterwards, however, Binghe wanted to discuss the possibility of bringing Mingyu back home with them. Her cultivation was strong for someone who'd grown up in this world, but there were some sacred mountains and spiritual gardens he wanted to introduce her to. Shizun's parents, too, might want to leave this place, but for now Binghe was content to go back to sleep with his husband and think of absolutely *nothing* else.

"I think you should take Ming-er back with you," Madame Bai said, apropos of nothing, a few days later as she and Binghe watched Shizun and Shen Zhan scribble ideograms on a freestanding chalkboard in the large study and argue about them.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Shen Zhan had developed most of the spell language that Shen Yuan had just dismissed to his face as 'clunky' and 'old fashioned'. Binghe would have been concerned, except they both seemed to be enjoying themselves enormously.

"This formula is garbage, dad," Shizun commented as he rubbed a clunky ideogram out with the heel of his hand and started to replace it. His father snatched the chalk out of his hand.

"It's not garbage, it's art," Shen Zhan said as he drew it back in. "This is the leading edge of array language."

"The leading edge *seventy-five years ago,"* Shizun shot back. He elbowed his father in the ribs and snatched the chalk back to redraw the contested area.

Shen Zhan rubbed the spot where Shizun had nailed him. "Betrayed by my own flesh and blood," he mourned.

"I'm adopted," Shizun replied blandly.

Binghe was sitting off to the side with Madame Bai. She was dealing with the seemingly endless tide of emails generated by the company where she served as CFO and Binghe was working his way through another book that Shizun had recommended to him. This other world had an abundance of literature and Binghe was enjoying being able to just indulge in light reading whenever he liked.

It was, in all honesty, the perfect vacation spot for them. Binghe's responsibilities couldn't reach them here and he hadn't realized just how elaborate his efforts to keep his personal time personal had had to get over the years. Here, he could actually set aside the burden of his rule and relax.

They'd been back 'home' once so far, both to make sure it was possible and to deliver Shang-shishu back to Mobei Jun. In doing so, they'd discovered that Shizun and Shang-shishu's other bodies had disappeared from Qian Cao to apparently merge with their original forms. When they arrived back at the Sect, Shizun was wearing Shen Qingqiu's face once more.

In the brief amound time they'd been there, there'd been an assassination attempt on Binghe, Shizun nearly got cursed by a wandering demonic cultivator, and they'd been called on to help burn out a patch of Love Grass that had escaped the watchful gaze of the disciples responsible for weeding out undesirable herbs on Qian Cao.

The less said about what they'd had to do to vent the effects of breathing in those spores, the better.

Binghe hadn't expected to emerge from this experience ever preferring another face to the one he married, but it was a welcome change when they returned to Beijing and Shizun became small and emotive again.

The energy required to transerve the void between worlds was not small, so Binghe and Shizun wouldn't be able to visit this place as casually as Binghe would have liked. However, it gave him an excellent reason to advocate for extended stays when they did make the trip.

Unlike Shizun's first trip, time seemed to flow about evenly between the worlds so Shizun returning to his body within a few hours of his death seemed to be the intervention of the god-thing calling itself the System.

"What about her school?" Binghe asked. He was very impressed by the education systems in this world and didn't intend to get in the way of his sister-in-law's education.

"That is important," Madame Bai agreed. "However, she's also at a crucial age in her cultivation and is approaching her first bottleneck. There aren't the same kind of spiritual resources in this world to help her through it. I'd feel better if she could spend time back in the other world with you and Yuan-er. It would be safer and she would make more progress. Also," there she paused, "I think she'd like to spend time with other young people who cultivate."

"Shizun would love to have her at Qing Jing Peak, I'm sure," Binghe thought the other Peak Lords would let her stay a while too, just to make Shizun happy *and* get him to visit more often. "You and Yuefu would be welcome too."

That was a point of contention between them. To Binghe's surprise, his mother and father-in-law had no intention of leaving Beijing.

"Our lives are here now," Madame Bai had explained when Shizun broached the topic with her. "Our cultivation is as advanced as it can be without ascending and I don't intend to do that while Qi-er and Jiu-er are still alive. This world is very convenient in its own way.

"You think so?" Madame Bai consulted her watch. "We should break those two up. The boys and Ming-er will be arriving for lunch soon."

They'd finally set a date for their second attempt at Binghe's formal introduction to the family. Of course, he'd already met everyone informally. This was just his mother and father-in-law's way of showing their approval.

Binghe was far less nervous this time.

"I'm thinking of talking to Qi-er and Jiu-er after the meal," Madame Bai continued. "I'd appreciate it if you and Yuan-er stuck around in case there are questions."

"Of course," Binghe agreed and let no sign of the fact that he planned for there to be a little incident at lunch show up on his face. His relationship with Shen Jiu hadn't gotten any better after that last conversation, not that he'd expected it to.

The tearing point had come when Shen Jiu texted Binghe with the frankly hilarious delusion that he was permitted to give Binghe orders in any capacity and said that there'd be dire consequences if he revealed anything about Shen Jiu's background to Shen Yuan.

Well, Binghe lived to serve. No one would find out about Shen Jiu's sordid history --from *Binghe.*

A natural consequence of being the punching bag for his entire Peak for years was that Binghe had an extensive repertoire of prank spells that ranged from terrible afflictions to annoying paper insects that flew at your face and wouldn't go away until they were dispersed with the spiritual energy of their target.

There were twenty of those insects waiting underneath the dining room table for Shen Jiu to sit down.

"I'm looking forward to it," Binghe said with a smile.

-Fin

Chapter End Notes

So maybe the System had a longer game in mind that involved more confusion and heart pounding moments as LBH neared the finish line, but all that suddenly seemed less important after SQH opened his mouth and blabbed about the punishment protocol. After that the System perhaps had a compelling reason to wrap things up and uninstall itself as quickly as possible before LBH had spare time and attention to devote to spontaneous vengeance arc.

So really, the MVP of this fic is Shang Qinghua. Will he get any recognition other than being deposited back in MBJ's lap? Not really.

Here is my usual tumblr plug: come visit me at TheFeelsWhale! :3

My twitter is: https://twitter.com/miscellea

If you are interested in my original projects, swing by and visit me on Royal Road. I'm Miscellea there: https://www.royalroad.com/profile/175208

My current original project is called #FairyPrincessProblems. Come check it out!

Chapter 11: Coda for Mingyu

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mingyu lasted about four weeks in her temporary placement at Xian Shu before sending a paper butterfly to Shen Yuan asking to be picked up.

“I was expecting to hear from her last week,” Binghe admitted when Shen Yuan showed him the note.

Yue Qingyuan had come out of seclusion in order to meet them at the gates. Somewhat unsurprisingly, Mingyu was waiting with him and had her bag already packed neatly at her feet. She was back in the neutral hanfu Shen Yuan had prepared for her when she first arrived.

“I’m sorry to see you go, Shizhi,” Yue Qingyuan told her once they’d all exchanged pleasantries. “If you’re willing to try life on another peak then write to me and I’ll arrange it for you.”

“Thank you, Shibo,” Mingyu said, with absolutely no indication that she was interested in taking him up on his offer.

“What happened?” Binghe asked as they returned to the Underground Palace via portal. The riverside retreat house was more comfortable, but didn’t exactly have room for guests so Mingyu’s ‘home’ in this world was, by necessity, in Binghe’s most secure palace. “You seemed excited to be a part of Xian Shu Peak. What happened to that book club you were talking about?”

“No offense, Ge, but they’re just *really* into RPF there and I can’t even handle that when it’s about strangers,” she replied with total candor. “Much less when it’s about my own brother.”

“RPF?” Binghe turned a quizzical look on Shen Yuan and Shen Yuan knew that he was about to have to get into another awful explanation of the terrible things his terrible homeworld was capable of.

“You don’t want to know,” he grumbled.

It was nice, being able to share everything with his husband --except for times like these.

Chapter End Notes

LBH is the only person who thinks Mingyu is a dead ringer for LMY. Like SY inability to recognize YQY as Alt-verse Shen Qi, Mingyu is just another mysterious mask-wearing lady cultivator.

Does this annoy the shit out of LBH? Lowkey, yes.

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Chapter 12: Coda - Mission Revealed

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shizun started at Binghe for a long time, long enough for Binghe to want to squirm.

Usually when he was the subject of his husband's unbroken attention like that, it meant that things were going to get interesting in the bedroom that night. Sometimes Binghe was not only allowed to call his husband 'Shizun' when they made love, but *required* to. Unfortunately for Binghe, this didn't look like it was going to turn out to be one of those nights.

"It was an *extra,"* Shizun breathed out at last, but not in relief. His mood was more like a dragon about to exhale fire.

Shizun surged to his feet and started to pace. "Extras are usually porn, side character stories, plot hole fillers, or domestic fluff," he muttered to himself.

Binghe considered that. Thankfully, he now knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that his world was not 'Proud Immortal Demon Way', but if their world was a novel in some other reality then it had probably 'ended' when Shizun chose Binghe over his sect. Just thinking about it made Binghe's heart compact in odd, but pleasant ways.

"Airplane's elaborate meltdown the year before last was probably an extra," Shizun continued pacing and thinking aloud. "That's a side character story."

"Would our wedding be 'domestic fluff'?" Binghe asked. He remembered the lightning-bolt feeling of seeing those servants handing out wedding favors and thinking 'I wish I could have that', only to realize that he could. 'Cultivation partners' was about as close to marriage as they got in the sects, but the sects had uniformly rejected Binghe. Why should he conform to their standards? So long as Shizun wanted it too then why should he care what they thought?

"After what you did with the wine?" Shizun looked askance at him. "That was porn."

"We should try that again," Binghe chuckled. Now that they had more sexual experience, he thought it might be fun to start experimenting in the bedroom again. Shizun had come to their union as virginal as Binghe himself was, but when he got into the right mood it was clear that he'd at least seen more than Binghe had and now that Binghe knew about the wide array of pornographic materials available in Shizun's original world, that made a lot more sense. "Do you think there's a video about it?"

"There is now that you've said that," Shizun grumbled as he dropped down to sit next to Binghe. "The rule about internet pornography is that if you can imagine it then there will instantly be five fetish sites about it."

"I look forward to testing that theory," Binghe chuckled and kissed his husband's cheek. "So, this adventure --we didn't do much. I met your parents. I saw your other house. I learned your real name."

"It was the plot-hole chapter," Shizun agreed, sagging against Binghe in a shameless sulk.

This was, by far, the best result of their adventure. Whatever thin separation that Shizun had been maintaining between them had evaporated. Now that he no longer had to pretend to be Shen Jiu when they were alone, he dropped the act entirely and became the brilliantly lazy and ridiculous man that Binghe had fallen so hard for as a youth. Shizun laughed more. He told bad jokes. He complained in comedic hyperbole at the slightest inconvenience. His body language became louder. He hid behind his fan less.

He trusted Binghe with his whole self and Binghe had never realized he could love someone this much.

"I think it was domestic fluff," Binghe said. After all, he'd gotten to spend most of that first stressful visit in a private house up in the clouds feeding his husband and gaining a new family.

What was that if not evidence that they were going to live happily ever after?

Chapter End Notes

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End Notes

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